

REALITIES OF LIFE

Compiled
by

VEN. WERAGODA SARADA MAHA THERO

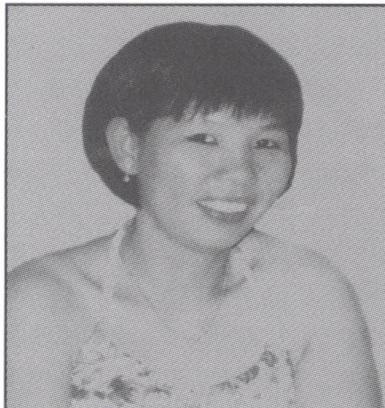
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“The Gifts of Truth Excel all other Gifts”



*Lee Wai Yang, Helen
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in loving memory of the
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Lim Oon Hai
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May she attain the Bliss of Nibbana.*

*Ven. Weragoda SaradaMaha Thero
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BUDDHIST REFLECTIONS ON DEATH

To the average man death is by no means a pleasant subject or talk for discussion. It is something dismal and oppressive – a veritable kill-joy, a fit topic for a funeral house only. The average man immersed as he is in the self, ever seeking after the pleasurable, ever pursuing that which excites and gratifies the senses, refuses to pause and ponder seriously that these very objects of pleasure and gratification will some day reach their end. If wise counsel does not prevail and urge the unthinking pleasure-seeking man to consider seriously that death can knock at his door also, it is only the shock of a bereavement under his own roof, the sudden and untimely death of a parent, wife or child that will rouse him up from his delirious round of sense-gratification and rudely awaken him to the hard facts of life. Then only will his eyes open, then only will he begin to ask himself why there is such a phenomenon as death. Why is it inevitable? Why are there these painful partings which rob life of its joys?

To most of us, at some moment or another, the spectacle of death must have given rise to the deepest of thoughts and profoundest of questions. What is life worth, if able bodies that once performed great deeds now lie flat and cold, senseless and lifeless? What is life worth, if eyes that

once sparkled with joy, eyes that once beamed with love are now closed forever, bereft of movement, bereft of life? Thoughts such as these are not to be repressed. It is just these inquiring thoughts, if wisely pursued, that will ultimately unfold the potentialities inherent in the human mind to receive the highest truths.

According to the Buddhist way of thinking, death, far from being a subject to be shunned and avoided, is the key that unlocks the seeming mystery of life. It is by understanding death that we understand life; for death is part of the process of life in the larger sense. In another sense, life and death are two ends of the same process and if you understand one end of the process, you also understand the other end. Hence, by understanding the purpose of death we also understand the purpose of life. It is the contemplation of death, the intensive thought that it will some day come upon us, that softens the hardest hearts, binds one to another with cords of love and compassion, and destroys the barriers of caste, creed and race among the peoples of this earth all of whom are subject to the common destiny of death. Death is a great leveller. Pride of birth, pride of position, pride of wealth, pride of power must give way to the all-consuming thought of inevitable death. It is this leveling aspect of death that made the poet say:-

“Sceptre and crown
Must tumble down
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crooked scythe and spade.”

It is the contemplation of death that helps to destroy the infatuation of sense-pleasure. It is the contemplation of death that destroys vanity. It is the contemplation of death that gives balance and a healthy sense of proportion to our highly over-wrought minds with their misguided sense of values. It is the contemplation of death that gives strength and steadiness and direction to the erratic human mind, now wandering in one direction, now in another, without an aim, without a purpose. It is not for nothing that the Buddha has, in the very highest terms, commended to his disciples the practice of mindfulness regarding death. This is known as “**maranānussati bhāvanā**”. One who wants to practise it must at stated times, and also every now and then, revert to the thought **maranam bhavissati**—“death will take place.” This contemplation of death is one of the classical meditation-subjects treated in the **Visuddhi Magga** which states that in order to obtain the fullest results, one should practice this meditation in the correct way, that is, with mindfulness (**sati**), with a sense of urgency (**samvega**) and with understanding (**ñāna**). For example, suppose a young disciple fails to realize keenly that death can come upon him at any moment, and regards it as something that will occur in old age in the distant future; his contemplation of death will be lacking strength and clarity, so much so that it will run on lines which are not conducive to success.

How great and useful is the contemplation of death can be seen from the following beneficial effects enumerated in the **Visuddhi Magga**:- “The disciple who devotes himself to this contemplation of death is always vigilant, takes no delight in any form of existence, gives up

hankering after life, censures evil doing, is free from craving as regards the requisites of life, his perception of impermanence becomes established, he realizes the painful and soulless nature of existence and at the moment of death he is devoid of fear, and remains mindful and self-possessed. Finally, if in this present life he fails to attain to Nibbana, upon the dissolution of the body he is bound for a happy destiny." Thus it will be seen that mindfulness of death not only purifies and refines the mind but also has the effect of robbing death of its fears and terrors, and helps one at that solemn moment when he is gasping for his last breath, to face that situation with fortitude and calm. He is never unnerved at the thought of death but is always prepared for it. It is such a man that can truly exclaim "O death, where is thy sting?"

IN THE Anguttara Nikāya the Buddha has said, "Oh Monks, there are ten ideas, which if made to grow, made much of, are of great fruit, of great profit for plunging into Nibbana, for ending up in Nibbana." Of these ten, one is death. Contemplation on death and on other forms of sorrow such as old age, and disease, constitutes a convenient starting point for the long line of investigation and meditation that will ultimately lead to Reality. This is exactly what happened in the case of the Buddha. Was it not the sight of an old man followed by the sight of a sick man and thereafter the sight of a dead man that made Prince Siddhattha, living in the lap of luxury, to give up wife and child, home and the prospect of a kingdom, and to embark on a voyage of discovery of truth, a voyage that ended in the glory of Buddhahood and the bliss of Nibbana?

The marked disinclination of the average man to advert to the problem of death, the distaste that arouses in him the desire to turn away from it whenever the subject is broached, are all due to the weakness of the human mind, sometimes occasioned by fear, sometimes by *tanha* or selfishness, but at all times supported by ignorance (*avijjā*). The disinclination to understand death, is no different from the disinclination of a man to subject himself to a medical check-up although he feels that something is wrong with him. We must learn to value the necessity to face facts. Safety always lies in truth. The sooner we know our condition the safer are we, for we can then take the steps necessary for our betterment. The saying, "where ignorance is bliss it is folly to be wise" has no application here. To live with no thought of death is to live in a fool's paradise.

Visuddhi Magga says,

"Now when a man is truly wise,
His constant task will surely be,
This recollection about death,
Blessed with such mighty potency."

Now that we have understood why such potency attaches itself to reflections on death, let us proceed to engage ourselves in such reflections. The first question that the reflecting mind would ask itself will be, "What is the cause of death?" Ask the physiologist what is death, he will tell you that it is a cessation of the functioning of the human body. Ask him what causes the cessation of the functioning of the human body, he will tell you that the immediate cause is that the heart ceases to beat. Ask him why the heart ceases

to beat, he will tell you that disease in any part of the human system, if not arrested, will worsen and cause a gradual degeneration and ultimate breakdown of some organ or other of the human system, thus throwing an undue burden on the work of the heart – the only organ that pumps blood. Hence it is disease that ultimately cause the cessation of the heart beat. Ask the physiologist what causes disease, he will tell you that disease is the irregular functioning (disease) of the human system in some part or other and can be caused in a variety of ways, such as by the entry of a germ into the human body, or by the violation of rules of healthy living or by an accident – each of which can impair some part or other of the human system, thus causing disease. Ask the physiologist what causes the entry of a germ or the violation of health rules or the occurrence of an accident. He will have to answer, “I do not know, I cannot say.” Certainly the physiologist cannot help us at this stage of our reflections of death, since the question is beyond the realm of physiology and enters the realm of human conduct. When two people are exposed to germ infection, why should it sometimes be the man of lower resistance power who escapes the infection while the man of greater resistance succumbs to it? When three persons tread the same slippery floor, why should one slip and fall and crack his head and die, while the second slips and sustains only minor injuries while the third does not slip at all? These are questions which clearly show that the answer is not be expected from the physiologist whose study is the work of the human body. Nor is the answer to be expected from a psychologist whose study is the work of the human mind only. Far, far beyond the confines of physiology and psychology is the answer

to be sought. It is here that Buddhist philosophy becomes inviting. It is just here that the law of Kamma, also called the law of Cause and Effect or the law of Action and Reaction makes a special appeal to the inquiring mind. It is Kamma that steps in to answer further questions. It is Kamma that determines why one man should succumb to germ-infection while the other should not. It is Kamma that decides why the three men treading the same slippery floor should experience three different results. Kamma sees to it that each man gets in life just what he deserves, not more, nor less. Each man's condition in life with its particular share of joys and sorrows is nothing more nor less than the result of his own past actions, good and bad. Thus we see that Kamma is a strict accountant. Each man weaves his own web of fate. Each man is the architect of his own fortune. As the Buddha said in the **Anguttara Nikāya**, "Beings are the owners of their deeds. Their deeds are the womb from which they spring. With their deeds they are bound up. Their deeds are their refuge. Whatever deeds they do, good or evil, of such they will be heirs." As actions are various, reactions also are various. Hence the varying causes of death to various persons under various situations. Every cause has its particular effect. Every action has its particular reaction. This is the unfailing law.

When Kamma is referred to as a law, it must not be taken to mean something promulgated by the state or some governing body. That would imply the existence of a lawgiver. It is a law in the sense that it is a constant way of action. It is in the nature of certain actions that they should produce certain results. That nature is also called law. It is

in this sense that we speak of the law of gravitation which causes a mango on the tree to fall to the ground, not that there is a supreme external power or being which commands the mango to fall. It is in the nature of things, the weight of the mango, the attraction of the earth, that the mango should fall. It is again a constant way of action. Similarly, in the realm of human conduct and human affairs, the law of cause and effect, of action and reaction, operates. (It is the called Kamma or more properly Kamma **Vipāka**.) It is not dependent on any extraneous arbitrary power, but it is in the very nature of things that certain actions should produce certain results. Hence the birth and the death of a man is no more the result of an arbitrary power than the rise and fall of a tree. Nor is it mere chance. There is no such thing as chance. It is unthinkable that chaos rules the world. Every situation, every condition is a sequel to a previous situation and a previous condition. We resort to the word 'chance' when we do not know the cause.

Sufficient has been said for us to know that in Kamma we find the root cause of death. We also know that no arbitrary power fashions this Kamma according to its will or caprice. It is in the result of our own actions.

“Yā disam vapate bijam tā disam harate phalom” – as we sow, so shall we reap. Kamma is not something generated in the closed box of the past. It is always in the making. We are by our actions, every moment contributing to it. Hence, the future is not all conditioned by the past. The present is also conditioning it.

If you fear death, why not make the wisest use of the present so as to ensure a happy future? To fear death on the one hand and on the other, not to act in a way that would ensure a happy future, is either madness or mental lethargy. He who leads a virtuous life, harming none and helping whom he can, in conformity with the Dhamma, always remembering the Dhamma, is without doubt laying the foundation of a happy future life. “**Dhammo have rakkhati dhamma cāri**” – the Dhamma most assuredly protects him who lives in conformity with it. Such conformity is facilitated by the contemplation of death. Death has no fears for one who is thus protected by Dhamma. Then shall he, cheerful and unafraid, be able to face the phenomenon of death with fortitude and calm.

III. Sankharas and death

ANOTHER approach to the understanding of death is through an understanding of the law of aggregates or Sankharas which states that everything is a combination of things and does not exist by itself as an independent entity. “Sankhara” is a Pali term used for an aggregation, a combination, or an assemblage. The word, is derived from the prefix “San” meaning “together” and the root “kar” meaning “to make”. The two together mean “made together” or “constructed together” or “combined together”. “All things in this world,” says the Buddha, “are aggregates or combinations.” That is to say, they do not exist by

themselves, but are composed of several things. Any one thing, be it a mighty mountain or a minute mustard seed, is a combination of several things. These several things are themselves combinations of several other things. Nothing is a unity, nothing is an entity, large or small. Neither is the sun nor moon an entity, nor is the smallest grain of sand an entity. Each of them is a Sankhara, a combination of several things.

Things seem to be entities owing to the fallibility of our senses – our facilities of sight, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting, and even thinking. Science has accepted the position that our senses are not infallible guides to us. A permanent entity is only a concept, only a name. It does not exist in reality.

In the famous dialogues between King Milinda and Thera Nagasena, the latter wishing to explain to the King this law of aggregates, enquired from the King how he came there, whether on foot or riding. The King replied that he came in a chariot.

“Your Majesty,” said Nagasena, “if you came in a chariot, declare to me the chariot. Is the pole the chariot?” “Truly not,” said the King. “Is the axle the chariot,” asked Nagasena. “Truly not,” said the King. “Is the chariot-body the chariot?” – “Truly not,” said the King. “Is the banner staff the chariot?” – “Truly not,” said the King. “Is the yoke the chariot?” – “Truly not,” said the King. “Are the reins the chariot?” – “Truly not,” said the King. “Is the goading stick the chariot?” – “Truly not,” said the King.

“Where then, Oh King,” asked Nagasena, “is this chariot in which you say you came? You are a mighty king of all the continent of India and yet speak a lie when you say there is no chariot.” In this way by sheer analysis, by breaking up what is signified by chariot into its various component parts, Nagasena was able to convince the King that a chariot as such does not exist, but only component parts exist. So much so that the King was able to answer thus,—

“Venerable Nagasena, I speak no lie. The word ‘chariot’ is but a figure of speech, a term, an appellation, a convenient designation for pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body and banner staff.”

Similarly, “human being”, “man”, “I” are mere names and terms, not corresponding to anything that is really and actually existing. In the ultimate sense there exist only changing energies. The term “Sankhara” however refers not only to matter and properties of matter known as “corporeality” (*rūpa*), but also to mind and properties of mind known as “mentality” (*nāma*). Hence, the mind is as much a combination or aggregate as the body.

When it is said that the mind is a combination of several thoughts, it is not meant that these several thoughts exist together simultaneously as do the different parts of the chariot. What is meant is a succession of thoughts, an unending sequence of thoughts, now a thought of hatred, thereafter a thought of sorrow, thereafter a thought of duty near at hand and thereafter again the original thought of hatred etc., etc., in endless succession. Each thought arises

stays a while and passes on. The three stages of being are found here also – **uppāda, thiti, bhanga** – arising, remaining and passing away. Thoughts arise, one following the other with such a rapidity of succession that the illusion of a permanent thing called “the mind” is created, but really there is no permanent thing but only a flow of thoughts.

The rapid succession of thoughts is compared to the flow of water in a river (**nadi soto viya**), one drop following another in rapid succession that we seem to see a permanent entity in this flow. But this is an illusion. Similarly there is no such permanent entity as the mind. It is only a succession of thoughts, a stream of thoughts that arise and pass away. If I say that I crossed a river this morning and recrossed it in the evening, is my statement true as regards what I crossed and what I recrossed? Was it what I crossed in the morning that I crossed in the evening? Is it not one set of waters that I crossed in the morning, and a different set of waters that I crossed in the evening? Which of the two is the river, or are there two rivers, a morning river and an evening river? Had I recrossed at mid-day, then there would also be a mid-day river. Asking oneself such questions one would see that every hour, every minute it is a different river. Where then is a permanent thing called ‘river’? Is it the river bed or the banks? You will now realize that there is nothing to which you can point out and say, “This is the river.” “River” exists only as a name. It is a convenient and conventional mode of expression (**vohara vacana**) for a continuous unending flow of drops of water. Just such is the mind. It is a continuous stream of thoughts. Can you point to any one thought that is passing through the mind

and say, "This truly is my mind, my permanent mind?" A thought of anger towards a person may arise in me. If that thought is my permanent mind how comes it that on a later occasion a thought of love towards the same person can arise in me? If that too is my permanent mind, then there are two opposing permanent minds. Questioning on these lines one comes to the inevitable conclusion that there is no such thing as a permanent mind; it is only a convenient expression (**vohara vacana**) for an incessant and variegated stream of thoughts that arise and pass away. "Mind" does not exist in reality. It exists only in name as an expression for a succession of thoughts. Chariot-river-body and mind—these are all combinations. By themselves and apart from these combinations they do not exist. There is nothing intrinsically stable in them, nothing corresponding to reality, nothing permanent, no eternally abiding substratum or soul.

Thus if body is only a name for a combination of changing factors and the mind is likewise only a name for a succession of thoughts, the psycho-physical combination called "man" is not an entity except by way of conventional speech. So when we say a chariot moves or a man walks it is correct only figuratively or conventionally. Actually and really, in the ultimate sense there is only a movement, there is only a walking. Hence has it been said in the **Visuddhi Magga**:

"There is no doer but the deed
There is no experiencer but the experience.
Constituent parts alone roll on.
This is the true and correct view."

Now, how does this cold and relentless analysis of mind and body become relevant to the question of death? The relevancy is just this. When analysis reveals that there is no person but only a process, that there is no doer but only a deed, we arrive at the conclusion that there is no person who dies, but that there is only a process of dying. Moving is a process, walking is a process, so dying is also a process. Just as there is no hidden agent back and behind the process of moving or walking, so, there is no hidden agent back and behind the process of dying. If only we are capable of keeping more and more to this abhidhammic view of things, we will be less and less attached to things, we will be less and less committing the folly of identifying ourselves with our actions. Thus shall we gradually arrive at a stage when we can grasp the view, so difficult to comprehend, that all life is just a process. It is one of the grandest realizations that can descend on deluded man. It is so illuminating, so enlightening. It is indeed a revelation. With the appearance of that realization there is a disappearance of all worries and fears regarding death. That is a logical sequence. Just as with the appearance of light darkness must disappear, even so the light of knowledge dispels the darkness of ignorance, fear and worry. With realization, with knowledge, these fears and worries will be shown as being empty and unfounded. It is so very easy to keep on declaring this. What is difficult is to comprehend this. Why is it so difficult? Because we are so accustomed to thinking in a groove, because we are so accustomed to overlook the fallacies in our thinking, because we are so accustomed to wrong landmarks and wrong routes in our mental journeyings, we are reluctant to cut out a new path. It is we who deny

ourselves the benefits of **Sammā Ditthi** (Right views). The inveterate habit of identifying ourselves with our actions is the breeding ground of that inviting belief that there is some subtle “ego” back and behind all our actions and thoughts. This is the arch mischief maker that misleads us. We fail to realize that the ego-feeling within us is nothing more than the plain and simple stream of consciousness that is changing always and is never the same for two consecutive moments.

As Professor James said, “The thoughts themselves are the thinkers.” In our ignorance we hug the belief that this ego-consciousness is the indication of the presence of some subtle elusive soul. It is just the mind’s reaction to objects. When we walk we fail to realize that it is just the process of walking and nothing else. We hug the fallacy that there is something within us that directs the walking. When we think, we hug the fallacy that there is something within us that thinks. We fail to realize that it is just the process of thinking and nothing else. Nothing short of profound medication on the lines indicated in the **Satipatthāna Sutta** can cure us of our “**micchā ditthi**” (false belief). The day we are able by such meditation to rid ourselves of these cherished false beliefs against which the Buddha has warned us times without number, beliefs which warp our judgment and cloud our vision of things, shall we be able to develop that clarity of vision which alone can show us things as they actually are. Then only will the realization dawn on us that there is no one who suffers dying, but that there is only a dying-process just as much as living is also a process. If one can train himself to reflect on these

lines, it must necessarily mean that he is gradually giving up the undesirable and inveterate habit of identifying himself with his bodily and mental processes and that he is gradually replacing that habit by a frequent contemplation on **Anatta** (**N'etam mama**, this does not belong to me). Such contemplation will result in a gradual relaxation of our tight grip on our “fond ego”. When one thus ceases to hug the ego-delusion, the stage is reached when there is complete detachment of the mind from such allurements. Then shall one be able, cheerful and unafraid, to face the phenomenon of death with fortitude and calm.

IV

WE have seen how reflections on the great law of Kamma and the great law of Aggregates or **Sankhāras** can assist us to form a correct view of death and help us to face the death in the correct attitude. Now there is a third great law, a knowledge of which can assist us in the same way, namely the law of change or **Anicca**. It is the principle behind the first noble truth, the truth of **Dukkha** or Disharmony. It is precisely because there is change or lack or permanency in anything and everything in this world, that there is suffering or disharmony in this world. This principle of change is expressed by the well known formula **Anicca vata sankhārā** – “all sankharas are impermanent.” Nothing in this world is stable or static. Time moves everything whether we like it or not. Time moves us also whether we like it or not. Nothing in this world can arrest the ceaseless

passage of time and nothing survives time. There is no stability anywhere. Change rules the world. Everything mental and physical is therefore transitory and changing. The change may be quick or the change may be slow, but change there certainly is. The change may be perceptible or it may be imperceptible. We live in an ever changing world, while we ourselves are also all the while changing.

A sankhāra, we have learnt, is a combination of several factors. These factors are also subject to the law of change. They are changing factors. Hence a **Sankhāra** is not merely a combination of several factors. It is a changing combination of changing factors, since the combination itself is changing. It is because there is change that there is growth. It is because there is change that there is decay. Growth also leads to decay because there is change. Why do flowers bloom only to fade? It is because of the operation of the law of change. It is this law that makes the strength of youth give way to the weakness of old age. It is on account of the operation of this law that though great buildings are erected towering towards the sky, some distant day will see them totter and tumble. It is this aspect of the law of change, the process of disintegration, that causes colour to fade, iron to rust, and timber to rot. It is such reflections that must have led the poet Gray contemplating a burial ground in a country church yard to say,

“The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
All that beauty, all that wealth ever gave,
Await alike the inevitable hour.
The path of glory leads but to the grave.”

Sometimes the working of this law is not apparent. Even that which looks so solid and substantial as a rocky mountain will not always remain as such. Science tell us, that may-be after thousands of years, it will wear down by the process of disintegration, and that where a lake now is, a mountain once was. If things arise they must fall, **Uppajjītvā nirujjhanti**, says the Buddha – “having arisen, they fall.” Aeons and aeons ago the earth and the moon were one. Today while the earth is still warm and alive, the moon is cold and dead. The earth too, science tells us, is very slowly, but surely losing its heat and water. Gradually and slowly it is cooling down. Aeons and aeons hence it will cease to support life. It will be a cold and lifeless planet. It will be a second moon. This is just one of several instances where the mighty law of change works imperceptibly. The Buddha also has foretold the end of the earth.

Just as the law of change can cause decline and decay it can also cause growth and progress. Hence it is that a seed becomes a plant and a plant becomes a tree, and a bud becomes a flower. But again there is no permanency in growth. Growth again gives way to decay. The plant must die. The flower must wither. It is an unending cycle of birth and death, integration and disintegration, of rise and fall. Hence it is that Shelly has aptly said,

“Worlds on worlds are rolling over from creation to decay,

Like bubbles on a river, sparkling, bursting, borne away.”

It is no arbitrary power that brings about these changes, progressive and retrogressive. The tendency to change is inherent in all things. The law of change does not merely declare that things change but also declares that change is of the very essence of the things. Think of anything, and you will find it to be a mode of change and a condition of change. Change (**aniccata**) is the working hypothesis of the scientist. One of the mightiest tasks of the scientist, also his proudest boast, was to destroy the idea of stability and fixity in the organic world. We have heard of the supposed entity of the atom being shown up as a combination of energies. While science has applied the law of change to the physical domain to split up unity into diversity, the Buddha has applied the self-same law to the entire mind-body complex and split up the seeming unity of being into the five aggregates known as "**Pañcakkhandha**".

The Buddha has gone further and explained why this aggregate is temporary, why it should some day disintegrate and why a fresh integration should arise upon the disintegration. Everything works upon a triple principle of **Uppāda**, **Thiti** and **Bhanga** – arising, remaining and passing away. Even in the case of a thought these three stages are present.

When the Buddha dealt with the four chief elements of the world of matter and showed that they too are subject to the great law of change, he proceeded to show that the human body which is also formed of the same elements must necessarily be subject to the same great law of change.

“What then of this fathom-long body” asked the Buddha. “Is there anything here of which it may rightly be said, ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘am?’ Nay verily nothing whatsoever.”

The sooner one appreciates the working of this law of change, the more will he be able to profit by it, attuning himself to that way of living, that way of thinking and speaking and acting, where this law will work to his best advantage. The man who knows the subtle working of this law of change, will also know how ‘**nāma**’ (mentality) can change by purposeful action. However deeply he gets involved in evil, he will not regard evil as a permanent obstruction because he knows that the evil mind can also change. He knows that by constant contemplation on what is good, good thoughts tend to arise in the mind. The constant contemplation of good will cause **Kusala Sankhāras** (good tendencies) to arise in the mind and these **kusala Sankhāras** will dislodge the **Akusala Sankhāras** (evil tendencies) – a process which hitherto appeared to him to be impossible. When his thoughts and tendencies change for the better, when his mind is permeated thus with good tendencies, his speech and deeds automatically change for the better – a pleasant surprise for him. With purer and purer conduct (**sīla**) thus acquired, deeper and deeper concentration (**samādhi**) is possible. Increased power to concentrate accelerates the pace towards the achievement of that Highest Wisdom known as **Panna**. Thus the bad in him changes into good. A bad man changes into a good man. By purposeful action the law of change is made to operate to his highest benefit. He now becomes a good man in the truest sense of the word. The good man is always a happy

man. He has no fear of death because he has no fear of the life beyond. Of such a man has it been said in the Dhammapada:-

“The doer of good rejoices in the world.
He rejoices in the next world.
He rejoices in both worlds.”

The powerful change brought about in his life will ensure upon its dissolution, the birth of a more fortunate being – a result which he can confidently expect at his dying moment. Not for him then are the fears and terrors of death. Further more when one follows minutely the working of the Law of Change in respect of one’s own body and mind and also in respect of another’s body and mind, one begins to acquire so close a familiarity with change that death will not appear as something untoward and unnatural. It will appear as just one more example of the process of change to which one has been subject all along since birth. It will appear as something to be expected, something that must occur to fit in with what had occurred earlier. To one who can thus reflect on death, there is nothing to fear. Cheerful and unafraid, he can face the phenomenon of death with fortitude and calm.

V. ANICCA OR CHANGE

THERE is another angle from which we can study death and that is from the angle of the law of conditionality which is closely akin to the law of **Anicca** or Change. Not

only are Sankhāras made up of several things but they are also conditioned by several factors, and when these conditioning factors cease to exist, the conditioned thing also ceases to exist. This is the law of conditionality and has been thus expressed in very general terms:-

Imasmim sati, idam hoti –

when this exists, that exists,

Imassa uppādā, idam uppajjati –

when this arises, that arises.

Imasmim asati, idam na hoti –

when this is not, that is not.

Imassa nirodha idam nirujjhati –

when this ceases that ceases.

As this principle is of universal applicability, the working of the process of life and death also comes within its operation. The chain of life-conditioning factors consists of twelve links or **Nidanas** which together are known as the **Paticca Samuppāda** or Law of Dependent Origination. A knowledge of this law is most necessary. In the **Mahā Nidana Sutta** of the **Dīigha Nikāya**, Buddha addressing Ananda said, “It is through not understanding, through not penetrating this doctrine, that these beings have become entangled like a ball of thread.”

The formula of Dependent Origination runs as follows:-

Conditioned by ignorance, activities arise.
Conditioned by activities, consciousness arises.

Conditioned by consciousness, mentality and corporeality arise.

Conditioned by mentality and corporeality, the six faculties arise.

Conditioned by the six faculties, contact arises.

Conditioned by contact, sensation arises.

Conditioned by sensation, craving arises.

Conditioned by craving, grasping arises.

Conditioned by grasping, becoming arises.

Conditioned by becoming, rebirth arises.

Conditioned by rebirth, old age and death arise.

This is the process that goes on and on *ad infinitum*. Hence has it been said:-

“Again and again the slow wits seek re-birth,

Again and again comes birth and dying comes,

Again and again men bear us to the grave.”

This important law is easier told than understood. This is one of the profoundest doctrines preached by the Buddha. It is only frequent and hard thinking on it that will bring out its deepest meanings. This is not the place to explain these twelve links in full², but in order to dispel some of the misconceptions surrounding the notion of death, it is necessary to make some observations on the first link – **Avijjā**, or Ignorance, and thereafter on the second and third links, *viz.* activities and consciousness, because it is these two links that involve death and re-birth.

These twelve links, it must be understood, do not represent a pure succession of cause and effect, a straight line of action and reaction. It is wrong to call this a causal series, as it is not a chain of causes in strict sequence of time. Some of the links though not all) arise simultaneously, and the nexus or connection between one factor and the next is of condition rather than cause. There are 24 modes of conditioning (**paccaya**) which may operate in the relation of one factor to another. Each factor is both conditioning (**paccaya dhamma**) and conditioned (**paccayuppanna dhamma**). Many of these factors are both simultaneously and interdependently working.

A few observations now, on the first link of **Avijjā** or ignorance. When it is said that Ignorance is the first link, it does not mean that Ignorance is the first cause of existence. The Buddha has definitely said that the first cause, the ultimate origin of things is unthinkable. **Anamataggayam sansaro, pubba-koit na pannayati**, “Beginningless, O monks, is this course of existence. A starting point is not to be found.” Bertrand Russell has stated, “There is no reason to suppose that this world had a beginning at all. The idea that things must have a beginning is really due to the poverty of our imagination.” Ignorance then is not the primary origin of things but is the originating factor of suffering in the process of life and death so far as man is concerned. All the twelve factors are continuing factors. It is only if we ponder deeply that we will be convinced of this truth, namely, that there can really be no beginning to a process that has no end.

What is meant by Ignorance as being the first link in the series? By Ignorance is here meant the Ignorance of the essentially fundamental facts of existence, namely, the fact of suffering or disharmony, the fact of the origin of suffering or disharmony, the fact of the cessation of suffering or disharmony, and the fact of the way leading to the cessation of suffering or disharmony. In other words it is the ignorance of that which the Buddha has called the Four Noble Truths. Ignorance is always a dangerous condition. In such a condition you are at the mercy of everyone and everything.

"Tis Ignorance that entails the dreary round
Now here now there – of countless births and deaths.

But no hereafter waits for him who knows."

The second link is Activities. By Activities is here meant volitional activities, called in Pali **Sankhāra**. The formula states – "Dependent upon Ignorance arise activities." This means that ignorance of the essentially fundamental facts of life becomes a conditioning factor for the volitional activities of man. It is only a knowledge and a realization of the Four Noble Truths that, according to the Buddha, enables a man to see things as they actually are. In the state of ignorance of these Truths man, prevented as he is from seeing things as they actually are, adopts various courses of action. These activities are not merely the outcome of ignorance once and for all, but ignorance continues to condition these volitional activities so long as existence continues. These volitional activities or mental energies are multifarious. In the context of the **Paticca**

Samuppāda, “**Sankhāra**” can therefore be said to signify “**Kamma**” or “**Kammic Volition**”. The first link of Ignorance and the second link of Activities refer to the past birth. The next eight links refer to the present existence and the last two refer to the future existence.

The third link is **Viññāna** or Consciousness. The formula states – “Dependent upon Activities arises Consciousness.” By consciousness is here meant re-linking consciousness or re-birth consciousness. By this formula is therefore meant that the conscious life of man in his present birth is conditioned by his volitional activities, his good and bad actions, his Kamma of the past life. To put it in another way, the consciousness of his present life is dependent on his past Kamma. This formula is highly important since it involves a linking of the past life with the present and thereby implies re-birth. Hence this third link is called **paṭisandhi viññāna** or re-linking consciousness or re-birth consciousness.

It may be wondered how activities of the past life can condition a present birth. Material sciences seek to explain birth on the premises of the present existence only. The biologist says that it is the union of father with mother that conditions birth. According to the Buddha, these two conditioning factors by themselves are insufficient to result in birth, otherwise every complete union of father with mother should result in birth. These two are purely physical factors and it is illogical to expect that a psycho-physical organism, a mind-body combination known as man could arise from two purely physical factors without the

intervention of a psychical or mental factor. Therefore, says the Buddha, a third factor is also necessary in addition to the two purely physical factors of the sperm and the ovum.

This third factor is **patisandhi-viññāna** or re-linking consciousness. The wick and the oil will not alone produce a flame. You may drown a wick in gallons of oil but there will never be a flame. You may use a wick of the most inflammable type but there will never be a flame. Not until a bright spark of light comes from elsewhere will the action of the oil and the wick produce a flame. We have considered that the activities of the past are certain energies – mental energies. The Kamma of the past releases these energies which are potent enough to create the condition for the being to be reborn in an appropriate place according to the nature of activities performed. These energies it is that produce the **patisandhi viññāna**, the third factor. It will thus be seen that these potential energies work in co-operation with the physical laws to condition the natural formation of the embryo in the mother's womb. Just as sleep is no bar to the continuance of bodily operations in consequence of the principle of life continuing within it, even so death is no bar to the continuance of the operation of being which is only transformed to another suitable realm or plane there to be re-born and to re-live, in consequence of the will-to-live remaining alive and unabated at the moment of dissolution. The life-stream, the process of being thus continues, while the Kammic forces it generates give it shape and form in the appropriate sphere of existence, investing it with its new characteristics and securing for it "a local habitation and a name". A seed coming

in contact with the soil produces a plant, but the plant is not born of the seed and the soil only. There are other factors drawn from unseen extraneous sources that come into play, such as light and air and moisture. It is the combined presence of all these factors that provide the opportunity for the birth of the plant. The unseen extraneous factor where the birth of a being is concerned is the terminating kammic energy of the dying man, or to express it in another way, the reproductive power of the will-to-live.

Is there any need to doubt the potency of the past Kamma to create a present existence? Do you doubt that the activities of one existence can condition consciousness in another existence? If so, calmly reflect on the incessant and multifarious nature of human activities, the one feature of human life, the unfailing characteristic of every moment of individual existence. When you have sufficiently grasped the fact of the incessant and multifarious nature of human activities, ask yourself the question who or what propels these activities? A little reflection will reveal that the activities of man are propelled by a myriad of desires and cravings which ultimately spring from the desire to live. This will-to-live by whatever name you may call it, motivates all activities. We eat, we earn, we acquire, we struggle, we advance, we hate, we love, we plot, we plan, we deceive, – all in order that we may continue living. Even the desire to commit suicide, paradoxical as it may seem, arises from the desire to live – to live free from entanglements and disappointments. Just consider the cumulative effect of hundreds of desire-propelled activities performed by us, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute

for a long period of years. These are all Kammas, these are all energies released. These are all strong creative forces that are generated. It is difficult to imagine that with the present life will end all the desire-forces it has brought into existence. There will always be at any given moment an outstanding balance of unexpected Kammic energies. These powers, energies or forces contain within themselves the potentialities of attracting for themselves the conditions for further existence. These energies or forces are potent enough to create the conditions for re-living when the boy which sustained these forces ceases to live. These then will constitute the terminating Kammic energy of the dying man, or to express the same idea in another way, this is the reproductive power of the will-to-live. In short, the will-to-live makes it possible to re-live. Now we see how the terminating Kammic energy of the dying man becomes the third factor, the psychical factor which along with the two physical factors of the sperm and the ovum, conditions future birth. It is this relinking consciousness that becomes the nucleus of a new **nāma-rūpa** or mind-body combination. This is the resultant terminal energy generated by the volitional activities of the past. Science teaches us that energy is indestructible but that it can be transmuted into other forms of energy. Why then cannot these powerful energies of the past Kamma, impelled as they are by the pulsation of craving and motivated as they are by the will-to-live, continue to exert their potent influences albeit in some other manner and in some other sphere? What is it that travels from one existence to another, you may ask. Do activities (Kammic energies) travel or do their resultant forces travel? Or does consciousness itself travel? The

answer is an emphatic, “No”. None of these travel, but the Kammic energy of actions performed is a tremendous force or power which can make its influence felt and to effect this influence distance is no bar. Distance is never a bar to Kammic energies making themselves felt. In the **Maha-Tanha-Sank-haya Sutta of Majjhima Nikāya**, the Buddha strongly reprimanded the bhikkhu Sati for declaring as the Buddha’s teachings that **Viññāna** or consciousness travels from existence to existence. “Foolish man,” said the Buddha, “has not consciousness generated by conditions been spoken of in many a figure of speech by me saying ‘apart from conditions there is no origination of consciousness’?” No physical contact is necessary for mind to influence matter. Sir William Crooke, in his Edinburgh lectures on mental science has said, “It has also been proved by experiment that by an act of will the mind can cause objects such as metal levers to move.” When the matter on which mental energies act is situated far way, in other planes and spheres of existence, we are only employing a figure of speech when we say that Kamma has traveled or that energy has traveled. Many a smile has been employed by the Buddha to show that nothing travels or transmigrates from one life to another. It is just a process of one condition influencing another. The resultant Kammic energies of human activity, not yet expanded, are so powerful that they can condition the formation of an embryo in another world and give it consciousness.

One important point must not be overlooked. The **Patī-sandi-viññāna** or re-linking consciousness arises only in the unborn child. In the pre-natal stage the re-linking

consciousness may be said to exist only passively (in the **bhavanga** state) and not actively, since the child is still part of the body of the mother and has no separate, independent existence nor does it contact the external world. When however, the child is born and assumes a separate existence and begins to contact the external world, then it may be said that the **bhavanga** nature of the pre-natal state of mind gives way for the first time to a fully conscious mind process, the **Vithi-citta**.

Distance is no bar to the sequence of cause and effect. Reference had already been made to the Buddha's reprimand of a bhikkhu called Sati for declaring as having been taught by the Buddha that consciousness passes from existence to existence. In the re-linking consciousness arises the whole energy of the previous consciousness, and thus the embryo while inheriting the characteristics of the new parents inherits also the impressions of the past experiences of the dying man. How else can one explain characteristics not accounted for by heredity? How else can one account for different characteristics in twins born of the same parents and growing under the same environment?

We have now studied death from several angles. From whatever angle we may look at death it is an integral part of the great process of life. Death is like the break up of an electric bulb. The light is extinguished by not the current, and when a fresh bulb is fixed the light re-appears. Similarly there is a continuity of life current, the break up of the present body does not extinguish the current of Kammic

energy which will manifest itself in an appropriate fresh body. The simile is not on all fours with life. Whereas there is nothing to bring the electric current and the fresh bulb together (a conjunction left to chance), the type of life led, the nature of thought entertained, the quality of deeds performed will be strong enough to cause an immediate relinking consciousness of like nature to arise, on the principle that like attracts like. Thus the dying man is drawn to an environment, good or bad, which he has created for himself by his thought, word and deed, for on these depend the nature of our future life. Every moment we are creating our future. Every moment then we must be careful.

If we can visualize the immensity of the past and the immensity of the future, the present loses its seemingly compelling importance. If we could but visualize the vistas of innumerable births and deaths through which we have passed and vistas of innumerable births and deaths through which we will pass in the future, we should not, we could not fear just this one death out of the endless series of births and deaths, rises and falls, appearances and disappearances which constitute the ceaseless process of sansaric life.

VI

THERE is yet another law the understanding of which helps in the understanding of death. It is the Law of Becoming or **Bhava** which is a corollary to the Law of Change or **Anicca**. Becoming or **Bhava** is also one of the factors in the scheme of Dependent Origination. According

to Buddhism the Law of Becoming like the Law of Change is constantly at work and applies to everything. While the Law of Change states that nothing is permanent but is ever changing, the Law of Becoming states that everything is always in the process of changing into something else. Not only is everything changing, but the nature of that change is a process of becoming something else, however short or long the process may be. Briefly put, the Law of Becoming is this:- "Nothing is, but is becoming." A ceaseless becoming is the feature of all things. A small plant is always in the process of becoming a big tree, and a big tree is always in the process of becoming an old tree. There is no point of time at which anything is not becoming something else. Rhys Davids in his American lectures has said, "In every case as soon as there is a beginning, there begins also at that moment to be an ending."

If you stand by the sea and watch how wave upon wave rises and falls, one wave merging into the next, one wave becoming another, you will appreciate that this entire world is also just that – becoming and becoming. If you can stand by a bud continuously until it becomes a flower, you will be amazed to see that the condition of the bud at one moment appears to be no different from its condition at the next moment and so on, until before your very eyes, the change has taken place though you could not discern it at all. The process is so gradual, one stage merging into the next so imperceptibly. It is a becoming. If you close your eyes to this process, if you see the bud one day and then see it a day later, then only will you see a change. Then only

will you speak in the terms of “buds” and “flowers” and not in terms of a process of a becoming.

If you can keep on looking at a new-born babe without a break for ten years you will not perceive any change. The baby born at 10 a.m. appears just the same at 11 a.m. or at 12 noon. Each moment shows no difference from the next. One condition merges into the next so imperceptibly. It is a becoming, a continuous process of becoming. Close your eyes to this process and see the baby once a month. Then only will you perceive a change. Then only can you speak in terms of “baby” and “boy” and not in terms of a process or a becoming.

If you think you can watch minutely the progress of time, see whether you can divide it into present, past and future as do the grammarians speaking of present tense, past tense and future tense. In the view of Buddhist philosophy, time is one continuous process, each fragmentary portion of time merging into the other and forming such an unbroken continuity that no dividing line can precisely be drawn separating past time from present, or present time from future. The moment you think of the present and say to yourself ‘this moment is present time’ it is gone – vanished into the past before you can even complete your sentence. The present is always slipping into the past, becoming the past, and the future is always becoming the present. Everything is becoming. This is an universal process, a constant flux. It is when we miss the continuity of action that we speak in terms of things rather than processes or becomings.

Biology says that the human body undergoes a continual change, all the cells composing the body being replaced every seven years. According to Buddhism, changes in the body are taking place every moment. At no two consecutive moments is the body the same. In the last analysis, it is a stream of atoms or units of matter of different types which are every moment arising and passing away. The body is thus constantly dying and re-living within this existence itself. This momentary death (**khanika marana**) takes place every moment of our existence.

In the **Visuddhi Magga** it is said that in the ultimate sense, the life span of living beings is extremely short, being only as much as the duration of a single conscious moment. “Just as a chariot wheel” continues the **Visuddhi Magga** “when it is rolling, touches the ground at one point only of the circumference of its tyre, so too the life of living beings lasts only for a single conscious moment. When that consciousness has ceased, the being is said to have ceased.” Thus we see that every moment of our lives we are dying and being reborn. This being so why should we dread just one particular moment of death, the moment that marks the end of this existence? When there are innumerable moments of death, why fear the occurrence of one particular moment? Ignorance of the momentary nature of death makes us fearful of the particular death that takes place at the last moment of existence here, especially as the next moment of living is not seen nor understood. The last moment in this existence is just one of the innumerable moments of death that will follow it.

It is not life in this existence only that is a process of becoming. The process of becoming continues into the next existence also, because there is a continuity of consciousness. The last consciousness (**cuti-citta**) in one life is followed by what is known as a re-linking consciousness (**paṭisandhi-viññāna**) in the next life. The process of one consciousness giving rise to another continues unbroken, the only difference being a change in the place where such consciousness manifests itself. Distance is no bar to the sequence of cause and effect. Life is a process of grasping and becoming, and death is a change of the thing grasped leading to a new becoming. Grasping is a continuous feature where human living is concerned. It is this grasping that leads to becoming. What causes grasping? Where there is thirst, there is grasping. It is this thirst, this desire, this craving, this will-to-live, this urge which is known as **Tanhā** that causes grasping. The Kammic energy resulting from this **Tanhā** is like fire. It always keeps on burning and is always in search of fresh material upon which it can sustain itself. It is ever in search of fresh conditions for its continued existence. At the moment of the dissolution of the body, that unexpended desire-energy, that residuum of Kamma, grasps fresh fuel and seeks a fresh habitation where it can sustain itself. Thus proceeds the continuous flux of grasping and becoming which is life.

Let us now examine the unduly dreaded dying moment which marks the end of man's present existence, only to commence another. The physical condition of any dying man is so weak that the volitional control by the mind at the dying moment lacks the power to choose its own

thoughts. This being so, the memory of some powerfully impressive and important event of the dying man's present existence (or his past existence) will force itself upon the threshold of his mind, the forcible entry of which thought he is powerless to resist. This thought which is known as the **maranasanna-javana** thought and precedes the **cuti-citta** or terminal thought, can be one of three types. Firstly, it can be the thought of some powerfully impressive act done (*kamma*) which the dying man now recalls to mind.

Secondly, the powerfully impressive act of the past can be recalled by way of a symbol of that act (**Kamma nimitta**) as for instance if he had stolen money from a safe, he may see the safe. Thirdly, the powerfully impressive act of the past may be recalled by way of a sign or indication of the place where he is destined to be re-born by reason of such act as for instance when a man who has committed a murder sees hell-fires or when a man who has done great charitable acts hears beautiful divine music. This called **Gati nimitta** or the sign of destination. It is symbolic of his place of re-birth. These three types of thought-objects which he cannot consciously choose for himself, are known as death signs and any one of them as the case may be, will very strongly and vividly appear to the consciousness of the dying man. Then follows the *cuticitta* or terminal thought or death consciousness. This last thought series is most important since it fashions the nature of his next existence, just as the last thought before going to sleep can become the first thought on awakening. No extraneous or arbitrary power does this for him. He does this for himself unconsciously as it were. The most important act of his

life it is, good or bad, that conditions the last thought moment of a life. The kamma of this action is called **Garuka kamma** or weighty Kamma. In the majority of cases the type of act which men habitually perform and for which they have the strongest liking becomes the last active thought. The ruling thought in life becomes strong at death. This habitual kamma is called **Ācinna Kamma**.

The idea of getting a dying man to offer cloth (**Pansukula**) to the Sangha or the idea of chanting sacred texts to him is in order to help him to obtain a good terminal thought for himself by way of **Āsanna Kamma** or death-proximate Kamma, but the powerful force of inveterate habit can supervene and in spite of the chantings by the most pious monks available, the memory of bad deeds repeatedly performed may surge up to his consciousness and become the terminal thought.

The reverse can also occur. If the last few acts and thoughts of a person about to die are powerfully bad, however good he had been earlier, then his terminal thought may be so powerfully bad that it may prevent the habitually good thought from surging up to his consciousness, as is said to have happened in the case of Queen Mallika, the wife King Pasenadi of Kosala. She lived a life full of good deeds but at the dying moment what came to her mind was the thought of a solitary bad deed done. As a result she was born in a state of misery where she suffered, but it was only for seven days. The effects of the good Kamma were suspended only temporarily.

There is a fourth type of Kamma that can cause the terminal thought to arise. This last type prevails when any of the foregoing three types of Kamma is not present. In that event one of the accumulated reserves of the endless past is drawn out. This is called **Katatta Kamma** or stored-up Kamma. Once the terminal thought arises, then follows the process of thought moments lawfully linked with it. This terminal thought process is called **maranasanna javana vithi**. The terminal thought goes through the same stage of progress as any other thought, with this difference that whereas the apperceptive stage of complete cognition known as *Javana* or impulsion, which in the case of any other thought occupies seven thought-moments, in this instance occupies only five thought-moments. At this apperceptive stage the dying person fully comprehends the death-sign. Then follows the stage of registering consciousness (**tadalambana**) when the death-sign is identified. This consciousness arises for two thought-moments and passes away. After this comes the stage of death consciousness (**cuti citta**). Then occurs death. This is what happens in this existence.

Now let us consider what happens in the next existence. Already the preliminaries for the arrival of a new being are in preparation. There is the male parent and there is the female parent. As explained previously a third factor, a psychic factor, is necessary to complete the preliminaries for the arising of a live embryo, and that is the relinking consciousness (**Patisandi-Viññāna**) which arises in the next existence in the appropriate setting – the mother's womb. On the conjunction of these three factors, life starts

in the mother's womb. There is no lapse of time, no stoppage of the unending stream of consciousness. No sooner has the death-consciousness in the dying man passed away than rebirth consciousness arises in some other state of existence. There is nothing that has travelled from this life to the next. Even the terminal thought did not travel. It had the power to give rise to the passive or **bhavanga** state. At the moment of birth which marks a separate existence, through contact with the outer world, the unconscious or sub-conscious **bhavanga** state gives way to the **vithi-citta** or conscious mind.

From birth onwards activity again comes into play, propelled by desire in some or another. So proceeds the onward course of the life-flux, desire-propelled and desire-motivated. Now what is the relevancy of a knowledge of the law of conditionality to the question of our attitude towards death? Once we thoroughly comprehend the fact that the will to live proceeds from life to life, we come to appreciate the view that this life and the next is but one continuous process. So also the life following and the next thereafter. To one who understands life thus as nothing more nor less than a long continuous process, there is no more reason to grieve at death than at life. They are part of the same process – the process of grasping, the process of giving effect to the will-to-live. Death is only a change in the thing grasped. The man enriched with the knowledge of the law of conditionality comprehends that birth induces death and death induces birth in the round of sansaric life. He therefore cannot possibly be perturbed at death. To him birth is death and death is birth. An appreciation of the law

of conditionality will reveal to him the importance of living his life well and when he has lived his life well, death is the birth of greater opportunities to live a still better life. That is how he regards death. It all depends on the way one looks at death. Suppose there is only one gate to a house, is that an exit gate or an entrance gate? To one who is on the road side of the gate it is an entrance gate. To the inmate of the house it is an exit gate, but for both of them it is the self-same gate which is thus differently viewed.

As Dahlke says, 'Dying is nothing but a backward view of life, and birth is nothing but a forward view of death.' In truth, birth and death are phases of an unbroken process of grasping. Death is a departure to those whom the dying man leaves behind. It is also an arrival to the members of the new family into which he is re-born. It is death or birth according to the way we look at it, but we can only be one-way observers. If we observe the death-process, we are not in a position to observe the birth process, and if we observe the birth process, we are not in a position to observe the death process. So, birth and death do not get co-ordinated in our minds as one connected process. By our failure to see the close sequence of the two processes, the co-ordination of birth with death or death with birth, we are led to the illusion or at least the wish that we can have the one (birth) without the other (death). We want life but we do not want death. This is an impossibility. Clinging to life is clinging to death. The salient feature of life is clinging-grasping – and the logical result of clinging according to the law of conditionality is death. If you want to avert death, you have to avert life, you have to reverse the process of

conditionality. This can only be done by abandoning the desire to cling, the desire to grasp. Let there be no attachment to life. If you attach yourself unduly to the things of life, happiness you may have for a brief time, but some day when the things to which you have attached yourself disintegrate and disappear as they must, by virtue of that mighty law of change working in conjunction with the equally mighty law of conditionality, then the very objects of joy become objects of sorrow. To your disappointment and disgust you will find that all sources of earthly joy are sources of sorrow.

You will then agree with the poet who said "Earth's sweetest joy is but pain disguised." As great was the joy of attachment so great will be the sorrow of detachment. Is not this suffering? Is not this wearisome – one day to pursue a phantom with excitement, next day to abandon it with disgust, one day to be exalted and the next day to be depressed? How long will your sense of self-respect allow you to be thrown up and down this way and that, like a football? Is it not far more satisfactory, far more dignified, far safer and far wiser to go through life unattached? If misfortune has to come, it will; if sickness has to come, it will. We cannot change the events of life but we can certainly change our attitude towards them. The laws of change and conditionality will help us here. Fears and sorrows will change into hopes and joys. To such a one living a life of calm and peace, viewing life with equanimity, death holds no fears and terrors. Cheerful and unafraid, he can face the phenomenon of death with fortitude and calm.

LET us now consider the cases of two persons who were overpowered with grief at the bereavement they had to suffer. First let us consider the case of **Paṭācārā**. She lost her husband who was bitten by a snake. She was too weak to cross a river with both her children – a new-born babe and a child about one year old. So she left the elder child on the bank and waded through the water with her new born babe with the greatest difficulty. Having reached the thither shore and having left the new-born babe there, she was returning through the water to reach the elder child. She had hardly reached mid-stream when a hawk swooped down on the new-born babe and carried it away thinking it to be piece of flesh. When **Paṭācārā** seeing this cried out in frantic grief raising both her hands, the elder child on the other bank thinking that his mother was calling him, ran into the river and was drowned. Alone, weeping and lamenting, she was proceeding now to her parental home whither she had intended going with her husband and her two children, when one by one these calamities occurred. As she was proceeding she met a man returning from her home town and inquired from him about her parents and her brother. This man gave the dismal news that owing to a severe storm the previous day her parental house had come down, destroying both her father and her mother and also her brother. As he spoke he pointed to some smoke rising into the air far away and said, "That is the smoke rising from the one funeral pyre in which are burning the bodies of your father, mother and brother." Completely distracted with grief, she ran about like a mad woman regardless of her

falling garments. Agony was gnawing at her heart, agony of the most excruciating type. Advised to go to the Buddha, she went and explained her plight. What did the Buddha tell her? “**Paṭācārā**, be no more troubled. This is not the first time thou hast wept over the loss of a husband. This is not the first time thou hast wept over the loss of parents and of brothers. Just as today, so also through this round of existence thou hast wept over the loss of so many countless husbands, countless sons, countless parents and countless brothers, that the tears thou hast shed are more abundant than the waters of the four oceans.” As the Buddha spoke these words of wisdom and consolation, **Paṭācārā**’s grief grew less and less intense and finally, not only did her grief leave her altogether, but when the Buddha preached to her and concluded his discourse, Patacara reached the stage of Stream-entry (**Sotā-patti**), the first stage of sainthood.

Now what is it that contributed to the removal of grief from the mind of **Paṭācārā**? It is the keen realization of the universality of death. **Paṭācārā** realized that she had lived innumerable lives, that she had suffered bereavement innumerable times, and that death is something which is always occurring.

While **Paṭācārā** realized the universality of death by reference to her own numerous bereavements in the past, **Kisāgotami** realized it by reference to the numerous bereavements occurring to others around her in this life itself. When her only child died, her grief was so great that she clung to the dead body, not allowing any one to cremate it. This was the first bereavement she had ever experienced.

With the dead child firmly held to her body she went from house to house inquiring for some medicine that would bring back life to her child. She was directed to the Buddha who asked her to procure a pinch of white mustard seed, but it should be from a house where no death had taken place. She then went in search of this supposed cure for her child which she thought was easy to obtain. At the very first house she asked for it but when she inquired whether any death had taken place under that roof she received the reply, "What sayest thou, woman? As for the living, they be few, as for the dead they be many." She then went to the next house. There also she came to know that death had made its visit to that house as well. She went to many houses and in all of them she was told of some father who had died or of some son who had died or of some other relative or friend who had died. When evening came she was tired of her hopeless task. She heard the word "death" echoing from every house. She realized the universality of death. She buried the dead child in the forest, then went back to the Buddha and said, "I thought it was I only who suffered bereavement. I find it in every house. I find that in every village the dead are more in number than the living." Not only was **Kisāgotami** cured of her grief, but at the end of the discourse which the Buddha delivered to her, she too attained the stage of Stream-entry (**Sotā patti**).

Let us now contrast the cases of **Patācārā** and **Kisāgotami** with that of the ignorant rustic farmer the Bodhisatta was in a former life as mentioned in the **Uraga Jātaka**. Rustic though he was he practiced mindfulness on death to perfection. He had trained himself to think every

now and then "Death can at any moment come to us." This is something on which the majority of us refuse to do any thinking at all. Not only did he make it a habit to think so, but he even saw to it that all members of his household did the same. One day while he was working with his son in the field, the latter was stung by a snake and died on the spot. The father was not one bit perturbed. He just carried the body to the foot of a tree, covered it with a cloak, neither weeping nor lamenting, and resumed his ploughing unconcerned. Later he sent word home, through a passer-by, to send up one parcel of food instead of two for the mid-day meal and to come with perfumes and flowers. When the message was received, his wife knew what it meant but she too did not give way to expressions of grief; neither did her daughter nor her daughter-in-law nor the maid-servant.

As requested they all went with perfumes and flowers to the field, and a most simple cremation took place, with no one weeping. Sakka the chief of gods came down to earth and proceeding to the place where a body was burning upon a pile of firewood, inquired from those standing around whether he was roasting the flesh of some animal. When they replied that it was the body of a man, Sakka wanted to know whether it was the body of an enemy. The father replied, "It is no enemy but our own son." "Then he could not have been a son dear to you," said Sakka. "He was a very dear son," replied the father. "Then," asked Sakka, "why do you not weep?"

The father in reply uttered this stanza:-

“Man quits his mortal frame, when joy in life is past.
Even as a snake is wont its worn out slough to cast.
No friends’ lament can touch the ashes of the dead.
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.”

Similar questions were asked from the dead son’s mother who replied thus:-

“Uncalled he hither came, unbidden soon to go.
Even as he came he went, what cause is here for woe?
No friends’ lament can touch the ashes of the dead.
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.”

“Sisters surely are loving to their brothers. Why do you not weep?” asked Sakka of the dead man’s sister. She replied:-

“Though I should fast and weep, how would it profit me?
My kith and kin alas would more unhappy be.
No friends’ lament can touch the ashes of the dead.
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.”

Sakka then asked the dead man’s wife why she did not weep. She replied thus:-

“As children cry in vain to grasp the moon above,
So mortals idly mourn the loss of those they love.
No friends’ lament can touch the ashes of the dead.
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.”

Lastly Sakka asked the mid-servant why she did not weep, especially as she had stated that the master was never cruel to her but was most considerate and kind and treated her like a foster child. This was her reply:-

“A broken pot of earth, ah, who can piece again?
So too, to mourn the dead is nought but labour vain.
No friends’ lament can touch the ashes of the dead.
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.”

**B A G
O F
B O N E S**

BAG OF BONES

INTRODUCTION

THE body is thought to be most obviously 'me', what I regard as the most tangible part of myself. Around it therefore are constructed many views, all of them distorted to some extent, which prevent insight arising into *the body as it really is*. This book is a small anthology relating to the body in various ways, and presents material which, if contemplated by the earnest and sincere student of Dhamma, will eventually provide fruitful insight and, thereby, freedom from the many desires and fears centered on the body.

Such desires for pleasures in which the body is the instrument (though it is in the heart-mind where they dwell), awaken and intensify greed of all kinds, for food or sex for instance. Greed which is often accompanied by pleasurable sensations and therefore desired, needs a rather bitter medicine to combat it: hence the number of pieces here on the unattractiveness of the body, its decay and death – all unpleasant matters. Some of the material concerned with bodily unattractiveness, is like a medicine which need only be taken while the disease of greed-lust is active, and afterwards may be discontinued. It is important to understand this, and not to form the mistaken impression that the Buddha advocated viewing all beauty as loathsome. It is only that there is a hook in beauty which tangles with the greed in one's own heart and leads to more and more complications and difficulties.

Fears centre around ageing-decay, disease and death. They are not overcome by pretending they do not exist, as the ostrich is said to bury its head in the sand at the approach of enemies. Only resolutely facing these inevitable features of life can bring insight and relief from fear.

The Buddha's instructions on contemplation of the body are addressed to those who are able, through their life-style, to practice them. This means in effect monks and nuns, together with dedicated lay people. The former group have this contemplation given to them by their Teachers at the time of Going-forth from home to homelessness, and they need such a medicine to combat lust, which is destructive to the celibate Holy Life. Lay people keeping the Five Precepts have contentment with their partners as an important part of their practice. Sex is a natural part of their life but should still be restrained and kept within the bounds of the Third Precept. If not how much trouble follows! But some of them may wish to live without sexual attachment, and this cannot be done in the way of Dhamma by ignoring the power of the sexual drive, or by suppressing it. Only when it is treated with mindfulness can it be transcended. The aspect of mindfulness which is needed for the subject, or rather the interrelated subjects of this book.

In the world today people are subjected to a bombardment of sensuality by way of the mass media. Sex especially is used as a bait to sell things, and as a titillation of sensory experience. When this subjection is continued the defilements of the mind, notably lust, greed and attachment, are sure to be strengthened. Then when this has

happened the result is not more happiness, only an increase of dukkha, suffering, trouble and difficulties. The medicine for such over-indulgence and over-stimulation is given in this book.

It is said that this subject of meditation is unique to the Buddha's Teachings and that elsewhere it is not clearly taught. This is not surprising as we find that desire sometimes accepted as being "natural". Wherever desires are viewed as "natural", that is, inherent in one's nature or self, nothing much can be done about them. But the Buddha analyzed desires into those which are wholesome – to practice Dhamma, for instance – and the unwholesome ones, among which are greed and lust. They may not be gross either, as in the case of the meditator who is greed for bliss, or visions, and attached to such things. The Buddha has provided the medicine for all unwholesome desires, and according to our various ways of life we can use it to effect partial or complete cures.

When the emphasis is so much on sensuality, youth and beauty as we find now, the darker sides of life get pushed away and attempts are made, always unsuccessful, to sweep them under the carpet. Those who try to do so will not be pleased with the exercises contained in the Buddha's contemplation of the body. Such things will appear to them as morbid and unnatural. Yet they are also a part of this life and should not be ignored. And if the effort is made to ignore what is unpleasant about the body, sooner or later one will be jolted into the recognition of these things. Such jolts are not pleasant. Rather than leave it until one is forced

to know the body's unpleasant sides it is better to acquaint one's emotions with this knowledge gradually.

In this spirit, BAG OF BONES is being published. Unfortunately, being only a book it cannot give person-to-person advice on special problems. It can only offer some general guidelines to people who are interested in reducing their greed and lust. *A word of warning:* meditation on the unattractiveness of the body can be very potent and should only be practiced with moderation and care if one has no personal contact with a Teacher of Buddhist meditation. If fear and anxiety, or other extreme unwholesome emotional states arise after practice of it, then it will be better to lay it down and take up Loving-kindness (**metta**) or Recollection of the Buddha (**Buddhānussati**) as one's meditation instead.

This book, therefore, is not so much for beginners in Buddhism but rather for those who have already practiced for some time. May it inspire many people to practice the Dhamma more intently!

Translations which have no one's name after them are by the compiler. And all other reflections, dialogues and poems too are his work, and have been jotted down as they occurred to him, mostly in the peaceful Forest Hermitage of Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera outside Kandy. May I also here acknowledge the venerable mahathera's kind advice and help in bringing this collection to print.

BHIKKHU KHANTIPALO

BAG OF BONES

1

“Bhikkhus, when *one dhamma* is developed and cultivated it leads to a great sense of urgency, to great benefit, to great safety from bondage, to great mindfulness and full awareness, to obtainment of knowledge and insight, to a pleasant abiding here and now, to realization of the fruit of true knowledge and deliverance. What is that *one dhamma*? It is mindfulness occupied with the body.”

(A. I. 43, trans. Ven. Nyanamoli)

2

The Advantages of Mindfulness of the Body

1. One conquers aversion and delight
2. And fear and dread as well.
3. Besides, one can stand cold and heat, hunger and thirst, troublesome things in the world, harsh words and painful feelings.
4. One obtains all four jhanas,
5. And supernormal faculties,
6. The heavenly ear element (clairaudience),
7. Knowledge of others' minds,
8. And of all one's past lives,
9. And sees besides, how beings appear and pass away according to their kamma.

10. Finally one enters upon the two deliverances (of the heart and by wisdom), and all taints (asava) are abolished.

(M. 119, Mindfulness of the Body)

3

“When anyone has developed and repeatedly practiced mindfulness of the body, he has included whatever wholesome dhammas (mental states) there are that partake of true knowledge (**vijja**).”

“Just as anyone who extends his mind over the great ocean has included whatever streams there are that flow into the ocean, so too, when anyone has developed and repeatedly practiced mindfulness of the body, he has included whatever wholesome dhammas there are that partake of true knowledge.”

(M. 119, trans. Ven. Nyanamoli – revised)

4

Insight Knowledge

“This is my body consists of the four great elements, is procreated by a mother and father, is built up out of boiled rice and bread, is of the nature of impermanence, of being worn and rubbed away, of dissolution and disintegration, and this my consciousness has that for its support and is bound up with it.”

(M. 77, trans. Ven. Nyanamoli)

“Now this body that has material form consists of the four great elements, it is procreated by a mother and father, and built up out of boiled rice and bread, it has the nature of impermanence, of being worn and rubbed away, of dissolution and disintegration. It must be regarded –

as impermanent – as (liable to) suffering,
 as a disease – as a cancer,
 as a dart – as a calamity,
 as an affliction – as alien,
 as a falling to pieces – as void,
 as without a self.

“When a man regards it thus, he abandons his desire for the body, affection for the body, and his habit of treating the body as a basis for his inferences.”³

(M. 74, trans, Ven. Nyanamoli)

You live by “*following the body*”? Eating when it’s hungry, resting when it’s tired, dressing when necessary, urinating, defecating, going to work to get money – all for what? For this body? Then what about the time when its end comes? What was it all for?

How much time do you spend on your body –

To feed it – to clothe it,

³ *Or “habit of following the body, being dependent on the body”.

To cleanse it – to wash it,
To beautify it – to relax it,
To rest it?

How much time do you spend on your mind?

8

Three things we never forget to do for the *body*!

wash it,
feed it,
medicate it.

Three things we usually forget to do with the *mind*:

wash it (with the purity of calm meditation),
feed it (with good Dhamma),
medicate it (mindfully ridding ourselves the diseases of greed, aversion and delusion with the supreme medicine of Dhamma).

The mind gets dirty and needs washing, it becomes hungry and needs nutriment, and it is most of the time diseased and needs curing.

Why are we so forgetful of our own good?

9

Gratification and Danger in Form (Body)

“And what is gratification in the case of form (body)?

“Suppose there were a girl of warrior-noble caste or brahmin caste or householder stock, in her fifteenth or sixteenth year, neither too tall nor too short, neither too thin nor too fat, neither too dark nor too fair: is her beauty and loveliness than at its height?”

“Yes, venerable sir.”

“Now the pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on that beauty and loveliness are the gratification in the case of form.

“And what is danger in the case of form?

“Later on one might see that same woman here at eighty, ninety or a hundred years, aged, as crooked as a roof, doubled up, tottering with the aid of sticks, frail, her youth gone, her teeth broken, grey-haired, scanty-haired, bald, wrinkled, with limbs all blotchy: how do you conceive this, bhikkhus, has her former beauty and loveliness vanished and the danger became evident?”

“Yes, venerable sir”.

“Bhikkhus, this is the danger in the case of form.”

(M. 13, “The Mass of Suffering”, trans. Ven. Nyanamoli)

N. B. Women reading this should change the sex of the person in the above.

**Reflections on her body by the former beautiful
courtesan, later the arahat nun Ambapali**

Black was my hair, the colour of bees, curled at the ends; with ageing it's likened to fibres of hemp not other than this are the Truth-speaker's* words.

Fragrant was my hair, full of flowers like a perfume box; with ageing it possesses the smell of dog's fur – not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

Thick as a well-planted grove and comely with comb, pin and parting; with ageing it's thin here and there – not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

Braided well, adorned, black masses beautified by gold; with ageing has the head become quite bald – not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

My eyebrows then as though by artists were well-drawn; with ageing they are wrinkled, hanging down – not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

Flashing and brilliant as jewels, black and long were my eyes;

* The Truth-Speaker (who speaks the truth of impermanence) is the Buddha.

by ageing overwhelmed no longer beautiful –
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

Long, beautiful and delicate my nose in the bloom of
my youth;
with ageing has become quite pendulous –
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

Fair my earlobes, formerly as bracelets well and truly
crafted;
with ageing they are wrinkled, hanging down –
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

Then were my teeth beautiful, the hue of plantain buds;
with ageing they have broken and yellowed –
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

Sweet was my singing voice as cuckoo in the forest
grove;
with ageing it is broken now and then –
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

Formerly my throat was beautiful, polished like a
conch;
with ageing decayed it is and twisted –
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

Round as door-bars then were my arms beautiful;
with ageing they are weak as the trumpet Creeper –
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

Adorned with gold and delicate signet rings my hands
were beautiful;
with ageing just like knotted and twisted roots –
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

Full and round were my breasts, close together, lovely
and lofty;
pendulous they hang now as water-skins without water
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

Fair was my body then as a well-burnished tablet of
gold;
now it is covered all over with very fine wrinkles –
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

Lovely both my thighs as the trunks of elephants;
with ageing they are as a bamboo's stems –
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

Fair were my legs adorned with fine golden anklets;
with ageing stick-like as the sesame –
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

As though filled out with down my feet so lovely;
with ageing they are cracked and wrinkled –
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

So was this congeries; decrepit now, abode of dukkha;
old house with its plaster falling off –
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

(Verses of the Elder Bhikkhunis 252-270)

11

“Come, bhikkhus, abide contemplating ugliness in the body, perceiving repulsiveness in nutriment, perceiving disenchantment with all the world, contemplating impermanence in all formations.”

(M.50, trans. Ven. Nyanamoli)

Directly counter goes this to the world’s way which is: to see beauty in the body or at any rate disguise the ugliness, to delight in food both physical and mental, to be enchanted with (the beauty of) the world (and forget the other side), and to regard mental formations as a basis for a permanent self or soul.

12

Rohitassa, a deva:

“Lord, the world’s end where one is neither born nor ages nor dies, nor passes away nor reappears: is it possible to know or see or reach that by traveling there?”

The Buddha:

“Friend, that there is a world’s end where one is neither born nor ages nor dies, nor passes away nor reappears, which is to be known or seen or reached by traveling there – that I do not say. Yet I do not say that there is ending of suffering without reaching the world’s end. Rather it is in this fathom – long carcase with its perceptions and its mind that I describe the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world”

(S.II. 36, A. IV. 46, trans. Ven. Nyanamoli)

13

The current rash of so much porn has the effects we see, increased and open expression of greed and lust. The meditation techniques which can cure these diseases are all the different aspects of mindfulness concerned with the body – for they cut the body down to size, without harming it, while emphasizing the importance of the mind.

14

Contemplation of the body's unattractiveness is not a popular meditation. People are happy to try to rid themselves of anger and hatred because they are painful. This can be done by the well-known meditations developing loving-kindness (metta). But the meditation upon the nature of this body dulls the appetites rooted in greed – and greed is often associated with pleasures! And isn't pleasure what this life's all about?

Safely bagged by Mara – Death and Lord of the sensual realm!

15

When the body is not washed it attracts flies and vermin which feed on it. When the mind is not purified but is full of lust, hate and delusion what does it attract...?

16

The body is so near, yet like an unexplored continent. Large areas in it are a blank. While this so, greed, lust and craving dwell safely in the jungles of ignorance.

People's attitudes to the body are liable to swing from the extreme of indulging the desires connected with the body, to the other extreme of mortifying it.

The Middle Way of mindfulness regarding the body is unknown to them.

When desires connected with bodily pleasures can be indulged, which means that *greed* rules the mind, *aversion* only arises if one's aims are thwarted; but when a person has undertaken some method of self-discipline not guided by wisdom (panna), then suppressed desires find their outlet not only by aversion but also by bodily mortification. As though the body was responsible! So, having no wisdom, people subject their bodies to "disciplines" and rigours of various kinds in order, they think, *to control strong desires*. Then *aversion*, that is self-hatred in a more or less subtle form, reigns supreme and sufferings are increased. Desires can never be understood in this way, only suppressed. The only way to understand desires is through mindfulness, and the various exercises on mindfulness of the body are for this purpose.

There are very few beings who do not suffer from lust, in this world of sensuality at any rate. It is a great sickness of the mind, an epidemic with no beginning, and no end in sight for most beings. Wise men want to be cured of this disease and the Buddha offers for this the medicine

of contemplating the unattractive in one's own body. One should not try to see the ugly or foul in others. This could turn to hatred – even if not, it could result in a “sour grapes” attitude to them. Towards others maintain one of the Divine Abidings: loving-kindness, compassion, joy-with-others, or equanimity, but towards one's own selfish desires for pleasure develop the seeing of unattractiveness.

20

True love, which is cool, unattached *metta*, and compassion for others' sorrows, do not grow when people are bound up with greed and sensuality.

21

When lust arises in the mind, which leads to more defilements, more burning desires in future, just take a look at this butcher's shop of a body. Anything attractive about red meat? Are white bones specially lovable? Or coiled “innards” desirable? Lust soon disappears when the body is regarded in this way. Repeating this practice, lust becomes weaker and arises less often.

22

“...no one who searches earnestly throughout the whole of this fathom – long carcase, starting from the soles of the feet upwards, starting from the top of the hair downwards, and starting from the skin all round, ever sees even the minutest atom of pureness in it such as a pearl or

a crystal or a beryl or aloes or sandalwood or saffron or camphor or talcum powder, etc; on the contrary, he sees nothing but various very malodorous offensive drab-looking sorts of impurity consisting of head-hairs, body-hairs, and the rest."

(M.R., iii, 4, trans. Ven. Nyanamoli)

23

The Thirty-Two Parts of the Body

The practice of this mindfulness attending to the body can begin by reciting this passage:

"In this very body, from the soles of the feet up, from the crown of the head down, surrounded by skin, full of these various mean impurities, he reviews thus:

"There are in this body –

Kesā	- head-hair
Lomā	- body-hair
Nakhā	- nails
Dantā	- teeth
Taco	- skin
Mamsam	- flesh
Nahāru	- sinews
Atṭhi	- bones
Atṭhiminjam	- bone-marrow
Vakkam	- kidneys
Hadayam	- heart
Yakanam	- liver

19 Kilomakam	- membranes
20 Pihakam	- spleen
21 Papphāsam	- lungs
22 Antam	- large gut
23 Antagunam	- small gut
24 Udariyam	- gorge
25 Karisam	- dung
26 Pittam	- bile
27 Semham	- phlegm
28 Pubbo	- pus
29 Lohitam	- blood
30 Sedo	- sweat
31 Medo	- fat
32 Assu	- tears
33 Vasā	- grease
34 Khelo	- spit
35 Singhānikm	- snot
36 Lasikm	- oil of the joints
37 Muttam	- urine
brain	

In this very body, from the soles of the feet up, from the crown of the head down, surrounded by skin, full of these various mean impurities, he reviews thus”.

(M. 10, Satipatthana Sutta, trans. Ven. Nyanamoli)

24

There is no unhealthy self-disgust or aversion here, just seeing what is unattractive as it really is. But in later times some teachers (such as Shantideva in his Bodhicāryavatāra)*

* Many verses in Chapter VIII of that work are certainly “sick”.

went to extremes in this matter. One must suspect in such a case not the proper dispassion with the body but rather perverted passion. Lust can switch to aversion and hatred quickly.

25

It is a remarkable thing that the first five parts on this list – the “person” we see – are all dead! Hair of the head and body lives only at its roots, we see dead hair. Nails that we see are dead nails, the quick is painful and hidden. The teeth, all that is visible, are dead, and their tender living roots we only experience painfully from time to time. Outer skin is dead – horrible if it was not, for it is sensitive enough already. The living skin below is more painful.

So when we get excited about a visual form – someone else’s body – we are stimulated by impressions of what has died already. Strange to be excited by what is dead on the outside and dying within! However, the real lure is in our own minds: the thoughts of lust that arise there and embellish the corpse before us.

Apart from this, live bodies and dead ones differ only in degree. Lust fastens only on the body. But loving-kindness and compassion are concerned with the well-being of peoples’ minds and bodies.

26

When we see a “person”, we see just the first five of the 32 parts: head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth and skin. When *head-hair* is of certain colours and forms, *body-hair*

present or absent according to sex and race, *nails* cut and cleared, *teeth* white, polished and with none missing, and *skin*, well washed and unblemished by scars or wrinkles and covering flesh of certain shapes – then with all these conditions fulfilled, desire arises!

What about grey or white hair on the head or body – thin and straggly, nails cracked, dirty and broken, teeth yellow or mostly missing and skin wrinkled and blotchy? Who gets excited?

27

Staring at corpses as recommended by commentary – writer Buddhaghosa in his “Path of Purification” is not really to the point. One has *inwardly* to stare at *this* corpse to accomplish anything.

And he gets much too complicated in his descriptions of how to do the actual practice, which does not require a lot of categories and analysis, or things to be learnt by heart. This applies to both the meditation of corpses and to the 32 parts of the body.

In the latter case, just a few parts are needed for repetition and inspection, and even one will be sufficient if one’s mind wanders. Simplicity and directness cut out the clutter of thoughts – and clearing those out is the way to get into meditation.

Meditation On Bones

“Bones in a pattern ordered
 Standing end to end
 With many joints, whose shaping
 On no one does depend;
 By sinews held together,
 Menaced by ageing’s threat,
 Incognizant, resembling
 A wooden marionette.”

(M. R., iii 22)

Contemplation of the Body: Charnel Ground Meditations

“Again, a bhikkhu judges this same body as though he were looking at bodily remains thrown on a charnel ground, bones without sinews scattered in all directions:

here a hand bone, there a foot bone, there a shin bone, there a thigh bone, there a hip bone, there a back bone, there a rib bone, there a breast bone, there an arm bone, there a shoulder bone, there a neck bone, there a jaw bone, there a tooth bone, there the skull.

“This body too is of such a nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that!

“In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body in himself, or he abides contemplating the body as a body in himself, or he abides contemplating the body as a body externally, or he abides contemplating the body as a body in himself and externally. Or else he abides contemplating in the body its arising factors, or he abides contemplating in the body its vanishing factors, or he abides contemplating in the body its rising and vanishing factors.

“Or else, mindfulness that ‘There is a body’ is simply established in him to the extent of bare knowledge and remembrance (of it), while he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.”

(from M. 10, trans. Ven. Nyanamoli)

30

When the mind is calm, look into this bony frame to see its emptiness, how the wind blows through it. Who owns these bones?

31

It sees that as the Elder (Maha-tissa) was on his way from Cetiyapabbata to Anuradhapura for alms, a certain daughter-in-law of a clan, who had quarreled with her husband and had set out early from Anuradhapura all dressed up and tricked out like a celestial nymph to go to her relatives' home, saw him on the road, and being low-minded, she laughed a loud laugh. (Wondering) “What is that?”, the Elder looked up and finding in the bones of her teeth the

perception of foulness, he attained arahatship. But her husband who was going after her saw the Elder and asked "Venerable sir, do you by any chance see a woman?" The Elder told him:

"Whether it was a man or woman
That went by I noticed not;
But only that on his high road
There goes a group of bones".

(The Path of Purification, I, 55)

32

A mound of about five feet high of bones, skulls, long bones and vertebrae all mixed up. No knowing where one person's bones ended and another's began. Over them all the hot sun beat down and bleached them, the rains lashed down and washed them; these remains of unknown poor people waiting to be cremated in a Chinese graveyard in Bangkok. A rare and stirring sight in these days of "window-dressing".

33

Suppose, that during meditation, this bony frame appeared to one's mind's eye but when one opened the eyes at the meditation's end, the bones of the hand, or other parts, were still visible without their covering of "decent" flesh – how upsetting for oneself – and others if they too could see it. How very odd to be so fearful of a part of one's "own" body!

Story

Once there was a man who had charge of a hothouse in which a great variety of tropical water-lilies and gourds were growing. On this particular afternoon it was cold and raining outside, so that a continuous stream of visitors entered to warm themselves and admire the exotic plants. Having sprayed the plants over with water from a hose the man bent down to turn off the tap. When he raised his eyes he saw, not people, but a procession of skeletons. The vision lasted a moment and was gone. An indication of what sort of meditation he should practise, perhaps?

“Bhikkhus, the bones of a single person journeying on, wandering on for an aeon, would make a cairn, a pile, a mound as great as Mount Vepulla, were there a collector of those bones and if the collection were not destroyed.”

(Itivuttaka 17)

“Just as when a space is enclosed by timber and creepers, grass and clay, there comes to be the term ‘house’, so too, when a space is enclosed by bones and sinews, flesh and skin, there comes to be the term ‘form’.”

(M. 28, para 36, trans. Ven. Nanamoli)

Or again, the Ancient Teachers said:

“Nine hundred sinews all around
 In this fathom-long carcase found
 Whereby its bony frame is bound
 As creepers serve a building to compound.”

Or how about this for the body?

“A tumour where nine holes abide⁶
 Wrapped in a coat of clammy hide
 And trickling filth on every side,
 Polluting the air with stenches far and wide.”

(M. R., quoting “Questions of Milinda” 74)

An Ulcer

Monks, it is just like an ulcer that had been growing for many years, having nine gaping wounds, nine lesions, and whatever discharged or oozed out of it would be foul and stinking, it would be loathsome.

“Ulcer”, monks, is a name for this body consisting of the four great elements, procreated by mother and father, and built up out of rice and bread. It is subject to impermanence, to breaking up and wearing away, to dissolution and to disintegration, having nine gaping wounds,

nine lesions. Whatever discharges and oozes out of it is foul and stinks, it is loathsome.

Therefore, monks, turn away from** this body.

A. IX, 15

40

“A man’s body is structurally simply a hollow ring. A hollow ring elongated into a hollow cylinder, with the inner portion further lengthened and coiled; and above the upper orifice there bulges a head and between the upper and lower orifices the limbs stick out. The world passes in small portions through the ring, helped in by spoon and gulping, and out by pressure and paper.”

(“A Thinker’s Notebook” by Ven. Nyanamoli, 240, March’ 56)

41

Tale:

A woman, infatuated, came to a bhikkhu and stripped off her clothes.

The bhikkhu, without batting an eyelid, said –

“Now take off your skin.”

42

“Beauty is skin-deep” – how true this saying is. Who wants a beautiful body without skin? How fragile is skin, but how strong is lust!

43

Another view of the body:

“A carcase daubed with bits of meat
Nine times a hundred when complete,
Where swarming clans of worms⁷ complete
To share the rotting midden for their seat.”

44

On this subject we have also:

“As to sharing the body with many: This body is shared by many. Firstly, it is shared by the eighty families of worms (parasites). There too, creatures live in dependence on the outer skin, on the inner skin, on the flesh, on the sinews, on the bones, on the marrow, feeding on these things. And there they are born, grow old and die, evacuate and make water; and the body is their maternity home, their hospital, their charnel ground, their privy and their urinal. The body can also be brought to death with the upsetting of these worms. And just as it is shared with the eighty families of worms, so too it is shared by the several hundred internal diseases, as well as by such external causes of death as snakes, scorpions and what not.”

(The Path of Purification, Chapter VII, 25)

45

The Discourse on Victory

(The Buddha):

Walking or standing, sitting, lying down, He bends it in or stretches it: this is the body's movement.

This body by bones and sinews bound,
bedaubed with membrane, flesh,
And covered up with skin –
is not seen as it really is.

Filled with guts, with belly filled
with liver-lump and bladder,
With heart, with lungs as well,
with kidneys and with spleen,

With snot and spittle, and with fat and sweat,
With blood, and oil for the joints,
With bile, and grease of the skin;

Then by nine streams the unclean flows forever from it:
Eye-dirt from the eyes,
ear-dirt from the ears,

Snot from the nose,
now from the mouth bile is spewed,
Now is spewed out phlegm,
and from the body sweat and dirt.

And then its hollow head is stuffed with brains;
The fool thinks (all is) beautiful – led on by ignorance.

But when it's lying dead,
bloated up and livid blue,
Cast away in the charnel ground,
even kin do not care for it.

Dogs eat it and jackals,
and wolves and worms,
Crows and vultures eat it,
and whatever other creatures are.

Wise the bhikkhu in this world
who having heard the Buddha-word,
The body he knows surely and thoroughly,
he sees it as it really is,
(Thinking): As this (living body)
so that (corpse was once),
As that (corpse is now) so this (body will surely be) –
So for the body, within and without, discard desire.

Such a bhikkhu, wise,
discarding desire and lust in the world.
Attains to deathlessness, to peace.
Nibbana the unchanging state.

Pampered is this foul, two-footed, foetid thing,
Though filled with various
sorts of stench and oozing here and there:

He who with such a body thinks to exalt himself,
Or should despise another –
what else is this but blindness?

(Sutta-Nipāta, Vijaya Sutta, Verses 193-206)

Dhammapada Verses on the Body

Not long alas – and it will lie
this body here, upon the earth!

Rejected, void of consciousness
and useless as a rotten log.

Verses 41

Having known this body likened unto foam
and understanding thoroughly its nature mirage – like,
cutting down the shafts of Mara, flower-tipped,
unseen one can go beyond the king of death.

Verses 46

See this body beautiful,
a mass of sores, a congeries
much considered but miserable
where nothing is stable, nothing persists.

Verses 147

All decrepit is this body
diseases' nest and frail;
this foul mass is broken up –
indeed life ends in death.

Verses 148

These dove-hued bones
scattered in fall
like long white gourds,
what joy in seeing them?

Verses 149

This city is made of bones
plastered with flesh and blood;
in it are stored decay and death
as well as pride, detraction.

—
Verses 150

Even rich royal chariots decay;
this body also reaches to decay;
but the Dhamma of the good does not decay;
so the good make it known to the calm.

—
Verses 151

But those who always practice well
bodily mindfulness,
do never what should not be done
and ever do what should be done;
mindful, clearly comprehending,
their pollutions out of existence go.

—
Verses 293

Well awake and watchful
ever are Gotama's savaka,
who constantly by day and night
are mindful of the body.

—
Verses 299

47

Two Pairs of Verses on the Contemplation of Beauty and Unattractiveness

One who lives contemplating beauty,

with facilities of sense unrestrained,
who knows not moderation in his food,
and who is indolent, of little effort;
him indeed does Mara overthrow
as wind a tree of little strength.

12 Verses 7

One who lives contemplating foulness,
with faculties of sense well-restrained,
who does know moderation in his food,
and who has faith, of roused-up effort;
him indeed does Mara never overthrow
as wind does not the rocky mount.

13 Verses 8

One who contemplates the beautiful,
of agitating thoughts and active lust,
craving in this person constantly increases;
that one indeed makes strong his bonds.

14 Verses 349

But who delights in calming thoughts,
he develops foulness ever mindfully,
he indeed will make an end;
that one will sever Mara's bonds.

15 Verses 350

48

Verases of the Arahat Kappa Thera

Full of many kinds of filth,

producer of much excrement, as ripe as a midden-pool, a tumour, a great wound filled up with pus and blood, as though sunk in a cesspit the body oozes water and ever filth outflows. Tied together by sixty tendons and plastered with plaster of flesh, tightly jacketed with skin – with no value, this body of filth.

A connected skeleton of bones bound together with sinew cords producing various postures by conditioned things combined.

Set out with certainty of death and near to King Mortality but having rejected it just here a man goes as he likes.

Covered over with ignorance and tied with the fourfold tie, enmeshed in the net of tendencies this body sinks in the flood.

Hitched to the five hindrances and so, affected by thoughts, accompanied by craving's root and wrapped by delusion's wrappings –

this body continues on, made to go by kamma's means,
its existence in the end destroyed, all sorts of beings perish.

Those ordinary people, blinded fools, thinking their bodies belong to them
fill up the fearful cemeteries and seize repeated birth.

Those who abandon this body as one would a dung smeared snake,
having vomited being's root, will, taintless, Nibbana attain.

(Verses of the Elder Bhikkhus 567-576).

49

Verses of the Arahat Nandaka Thera

Shame on it then, full of stinks
and oozing, Mara's partisan,
in your body nine streams are
leaking out continually.

Do not conceive of these filled-up things,
they are not praised by Tathagatas
who desire not even the heavens,
not to speak of the human world.

But those who are foolish, stupid,
ill-counselled, dullness-shrouded,
such do indeed desire it
thrown down by Mara's snare.

Those in whom desire and hate
and ignorance are discarded –
such do not desire it,
severed their ropes – unbound!

(Verses of the Elder Bhikkhus 279-282).

50

Verses of the Arahat Sabbakama Thera

This foul two-footed thing,
full of many kinds of filth
flowing out from here and there,
ill-smelling – dearly loved it is.

As by a trap the wary deer,
as by the hook the fish,
just as the monkey's caught with pitch
so ordinary men are trapped.

Forms, sounds, smells and tastes
and tangibles, delighting the mind,
these are the five cords of desire
seen in a woman's form.*

* Women reading this must substitute "a man's form".

Those who pursue them – ordinary men with minds enflamed – fill up the fearful cemeteries and hear up further birth.

But one who does avoid it as the feet a serpent's head, mindful, such a one transcends clinging to this world

Seeing the danger of sensual desires, renunciation seeing secure, escaped from all desires* to exhaustion of taints attained.

(Verses of the Elder Bhikkhus 453-458)

51

Verses of the Arahat Ratthapala

His family tried to snare him, with the bait of his former wives and good food, into returning to the household life, at which he said:

“Behold a puppet here pranked out,
A body built up out of sores,
Sick, and much object for concern,
Where no stability abides.

* This Thera's name means “all desires”.

Behold a figure here pranked out
With jewelry and earring too,
A skeleton wrapped up in skin,
Made creditable by its clothes.

Its feet adorned with henna dye
And powder smeared upon its face,
It may beguile a fool, but not
A seeker of the Further Shore.

Its hair is dressed in eightfold plaits
And unguent smeared upon its eyes.
It may beguile a fool, but not
A seeker of the Further Shore.

A filthy body decked without
Like a new-painted unguent pot,
It may beguile a fool, but not
A seeker of the Further Shore.

The deer-hunter sets well the snare
But the deer springs not the trap;
We eat the bait, and we depart,
Leaving the hunters to lament".

(M. 82, trans. Ven. Nyanamoli)

52

The vast array of "beauty products" for both male and female, should make people think. If it is so necessary to beautify the body what is it really like?

53

This impure body
like a wave that rises suddenly,
breaks and disperses.

This impure body
like a speck of dust
in a desert land
where mirages are seen.

Wijayasiri Amaratunga

54

The body is like a leaky barrel, oozing all the time. But a barrel can be bunged up, while the body must continue oozing its whole life.

55

A drum has four characteristics – it is round in section, covered by hide, is beaten frequently and emits sound. In the same way the body has four characteristics: it is round in section or fairly much so, it also is covered by hide, it is beaten by the many sorts of physical and mental dukkha, and emits sound, that is the sounds indicating pleasure which is unreliable and impermanent, and those which accompany suffering such as weeping and lamentation. And who is the beater? His name is *Craving*.

56

The Buddha said:

“Birth is dukkha,* disease is dukkha, decay is dukkha, death is dukkha” – all this is dukkha related to this body. It is interesting that each sort of dukkha has special institutions in Western society to screen it off from the generality of people, who are “in between” these events so to speak. Birth takes place in maternity wards and nursing homes. Other parts of the same hospital take care of “disease”. For “decay” we have old peoples’ homes and the geriatric wards, while “death” may occur in all such places, the corpse then going on to the undertakers’ chapels, and to religious rites. Things hidden away are unhealthy. Look at the dukkha! Look at it!

57

When one considers how many things afflict this body, it is a wonder that it keeps going so well and for so long!

58

There is so much dukkha connected with this body, which people never notice due to shifting around from one position to another. When tired of walking or standing they sit down; when tired of sitting, they stand or lie down, when

* Suffering of all kinds, physical and mental, and suffering due to the impermanence of everything.

they have enough of lying down, they get up. Walking an unexpectedly long distance is dukkha. Standing long in a queue is dukkha. Sitting in even a comfortable chair for hours is dukkha. Lying in a hospital bed for days or weeks is dukkha. By changing position we evade the dukkha, or make it less obvious. But when someone starts to meditate, spending hours on walking meditation, hours on sitting meditation – then this bodily dukkha can be felt and investigated.

59

Pain and the Body

“The uninstructed ordinary person, bhikkhus, has a saying: ‘There is a bottomless abyss in the great ocean’. But the uninstructed ordinary person speaks of what does not exist, of what cannot be found, that is that there is a bottomless abyss in the great ocean. A designation for painful bodily feeling, bhikkhus, is this term ‘bottomless abyss’.

When an uninstructed ordinary person experiences painful bodily feeling, he grieves, is afflicted, laments, beats his breast, cries out loud and becomes distraught. So it is said, bhikkhus, the uninstructed ordinary person has not emerged from the bottomless abyss, has not obtained a firm foothold.

“But, bhikkhus, when an instructed Nobel Disciple experiences painful bodily feeling he does not grieve, is not afflicted, does not lament, nor beat his breast, nor cry out loud, nor become distraught. So it is said, bhikkhus, the

instructed Noble Disciple has emerged from the bottomless abyss and has obtained a firm foothold."

(S. XXXVI, 4, trans. Ven. Nyanaponika)

60 This “form” (=body)

"Why does one say ‘form’ (*rupa*)? It is deformed (*ruppati*), that is why it is called ‘form’. Deformed by what? By cold and heat and hunger and thirst, by contact with mosquitoes, flies, wind, sunburn, and creeping things."

(S. XII, 79, trans. Ven. Nyanamoli)

61

One could play similar word games in English: Why is it called a *body*? because it is one’s *abode*, therefore it is a *body*; or again because it *bodes no good*, therefore it is a *body* – though this is rather pessimistic perhaps. To balance up one could etymologize thus: It is called a *body* since depending on it *bodhi* is discovered.

62

The Body’s Needs as the Buddha summarized them

Clothing to cover it,
food to sustain it,
shelter to keep it from harm,
and medicine to cure it.

Buddhist monks recollect these four “supports” everyday.

A way of cutting down greed

Few and simple clothes cover it,
enough wholesome food sustains it,
a small shelter keeps it from harm,
and appropriate medicine cures it.

- How many sets of clothes can you wear at once?
- How many different dishes do you need to eat?
- How much room does this body fill?
- How many pills and powders to keep in health?

63

Greed and the Body

Look at it like this:

There's a wardrobe with lots of clothes to cover your body. Are they all needed? (There are some clothesless poor in this world.)

There is a pantry, (a refrigerator and a freezer?) stacked with food. Is all that variety and quantity needed? (There are people starving in this world.)

There's the house one lives in with its furnishings. Is it too large or too luxurious? (There are houseless people in this world.)

There's that medicine chest of pills and creams and whatnot. Can you use them all? Are they all needed? (How many people have no medicine in this world?)

64 Overeating? Gluttony?

Then read these verses:

The food and drink so greatly prized –
The crisp to chew, the soft to suck –
Go in all by a single door,
But by nine doors* come oozing out.

The food and drink so greatly prized –
The crisp to chew, the soft to suck –
Men like to eat in company,
But to excrete in secrecy.

The food and drink so greatly prized –
The crisp to chew, the soft to suck –
These a man eats with high delight,
And then excretes in dumb disgust.

The food and drink so greatly prized –
The crisp to chew, the soft to suck –
A single night will be enough
To bring them to putridity.

(The Path of Purification, Ch. XI, para. 23)

(Remember while eating!)

* Go in by the mouth but can come out from eyes (2), ears (2), nostrils (2), mouth, urinary duct, and anus, as various sorts of "dirt".

Reflections on a Loo

Earth and water elements inside
press to get out,
all that solid food, and drink
ingested, must be in time extruded.

No polished "sanitary ware"
adorns my forest loo
all natural
a wooden platform raised upon a pit.

Where I walk up and down
pacing steadily to still the mad mind,
at the end surrounded by trees –
my lovely loo.

Trees with asbestos sheeting broken up
nailed to the trunks – for privacy,
where only trees can watch
bored – but nourished – by this necessity.

To climb up to my toilet
six feet up swaying with the trunks
of trees, two logs are driven in the ground
as steps up to the throne.

A platform with a hole
through which one can look down

ten feet to the papered pit below
and watch the great black dung –

beetles at work burying the mess,
hygienic from our point of view
but what a birth to get,
perhaps for perverters and pornographers?

Anyway, I squat lordly far above
while water and earth elements within
join water and earth elements without.

When within I call them “mine”;
when in the pit they’re not me –
where does the change take place?
Strange mind which loves this stinking form
but loathes the stink down there.

Rejoicing in fine flavours,
detesting stench and excrement:
“I” am made up of all this
rejoicing and detesting.

‘Pansa’ (Vassa, the Rains) 2515/1972

Food arranged nicely on plates is attractive to the eyes
and nose. “It looks good!” – “It smells good!” – people say.
When it reaches the mouth it is attractive to the tongue and

touch. They say "How good it tastes!" or "Real crunchy!" (crackly, creamy or whatever). But just spit it out – attractive to the eyes now or not? Greed can only arise if conditions are right for it. And how attractive is the same food spewed up after a few hours in the belly? It becomes even less desirable when after a day or two its remains are expelled. Three stages for contemplation!

67

As the meditator finds out, without food the body becomes weak, with much food it is heavy and disturbed: two kinds of dukkha. The only way is to know moderation in food, neither altogether abstaining, which can easily become the extreme of self-mortification; nor overeating, which is just the other extreme of sensual pleasure.

68

Remind Yourself:

"This requisite that accrued to me –
it's just mere various elements,
that is, these clothes
and the person using them –
just elements,
not a person,
not a being,
just void.

“This requisite that accrued to me –
it’s just mere various elements,
that is, this food

and the person using it –
just elements,
not a person,
not a being,
just void.

“This requisite that accrued to me –
it’s just mere various elements,
that is, this shelter
and the person using it –
just elements,
not a person,
not a being,
just void.

“This requisite that accrued to me –
it’s just mere various elements,
that is, this medicine
and the person using it –
just elements,
not a person,
not a being,
just void.”

(Translated from a traditional Pali recollection;
“*Yathā paccayam...*”)

69 A Fleck of Foam

At one time the Lord was staying at Ayojjhaya on the bank of the river Ganges. There the Lord addressed the bhikkhus as follows:

“Suppose, bhikkhus, a large fleck of foam were floating on this river Ganges and a clear-sighted man were to see it, observe it and properly examine it. Having done this it would appear to him to be empty insubstantial, without essence – for what essence could there be in a fleck of foam?

“In the same way, bhikkhus, whatever body, past, future, or present, in oneself or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, that a bhikkhu sees, observes and properly examines... It would appear to him to be empty, insubstantial, without essence – for what essence could there be in a body?...”

The Kinsman of the Sun made clear:

Form compared to a fleck of foam,

Feeling to a bubble compared,*

And perception to a mirage,

Thoughts compared to a plantain-tree**

And consciousness to a magical trick.

(from S. XXII, 95)

* The Thai *bubbulupama* is translated “a wave compared”, a wave being a very suitable simile for feeling.

** A banana-plant

“My” body, but mosquitoes like to suck its blood,
 “My” body, but fleas and bugs find on it a feeding place.
 “My” body, nits and lice enjoy it too.
 “My” body, which makes a cattle-tick a meal.
 “My” body, where worms live happily.
 “My” body, attacked by microscopic foes.
 “My” body, sure it gets sick without permission.
 “My” body, which is not well though I want it so.
 “My” body, getting old from day to day.
 “My” body, though I want youth, ever ages.
 “My” body, goes and dies against my cries.
 “My” body, buried or burned to elements turned.
 “My” body – how come?
 “My”? Who’s the owner here?

A Rationalist and a Buddhist

B. Whose is that body?
 R. It’s mine, of course!
 B. Better be careful with that “of course”. Anyway, how do you know it’s your body?
 R. Well, I see it – every day for years.
 B. So it’s yours because you see it?
 R. Yes. Besides, I feel it’s mine.
 B. O. K. So that’s another reason why it belongs to you. You feel it – right?
 R. Sure! It feels like me.

B. Any other evidence that it's yours? What about the other senses?

R. I suppose you could say that I hear it too. My guts gurgle and my feet thump the deck. Of course it smells like me too. Taste? Oh I don't think that helps identify it very much. So that's all the senses, and they tell me that it is mine.

B. You've left out the most important sense – the mind. That tells you "this is my body" all the time...

R. Yes, if you want to call mind a sense. Yes, it identifies what is mine and what is not.

B. Well, I don't think it is so easy to tell what is one's own and what is not.

R. Oh, that's easy. I have power over what is mine – like my own bank-account. I can do what I like with it.

B. I see that you have a bandaged finger. Show me how much power you have over it by healing it instantly!

R. Can't do that, you know. It's not natural!

B. Well now, what is natural? And does power over a thing signify ownership? For instance, that bit of dead wood over there. Is it myself?

R. Oh, come on...of course not!

B. But it's quite natural, and one can do nothing about making it live again. When it lived, that life was conditioned by many factors, now it's dead because of those factors' change. Yet you say "my body"!

R. It is mine! It has belonged to me since I was born!

B. Righto! Then "your" body, which you can't heal – at least you know when it is going to die?

R. No...(faltering). I've no idea...but...

B. But it's your body, and you can't cure it, can't stop it getting old, can't stop it dying, you don't even know when that body's going to die. But still it's your body. How much yours?

(Silence)

B. And who is the owner anyway?

(Silence)

72

Not Yours

"This body, bhikkhus, is not yours nor is it others'. It should be seen as produced by past kamma, volitions and feelings. Regarding this, the learned noble disciple thoroughly and systematically attends to dependent origination: This being, that is; from the arising of this, that arises; this not being, that is not; from the cessation of this, that ceases. That is to say: Unknowing conditions kamma-formations..." (S.II.37)

73

The brain proclaimed: "I'm the boss here. Get up instantly, lazy bones!"

Groans from the bones: "I'm broken! I'm smashed! Who are you ordering around anyway? Yeah, who is *he*? Garn, we boss the lot, unless we are whole the contraption can't stand!"

Outcry fro the tendons: "You bones'll stand up by yourselves, will yer? Won't do without us! Just fall to bits, a right skelington!"

A howl from the heart: "What *are* you all quarrelling about? No one gets anywhere without me, Old Brain least of all!"

A grunt from the guts: "Now don't you get superior, heart! Where you goin-a-be without us workers sending you food?"

Clamour from the kidneys: "Fine mess you'll be in without us!"

Loud laugh from the lungs: "'Ere, wotcha gonna do without us twin windbags? Won't get very far, will yer?"

Shriek from the skin: "Shudup the lot of you! I wrap you all up so that you don't look like a butcher's shop!"

And so the debate went on but no master could be found.

Holes and holiness

Unfillable hole
this whole body
look at it – hollow

holes for food in
and holes for muck out
holes for air both in and out
down to hollow lungs,
below is a hole of a belly
and yards of hollow tubes
a big hole of a bladder
holes everywhere; some senses lurk in hollows –
eye-holes, ear-holes too,
the tongue in its hollow mouth
the air-holes holding smell;
one great big hole, hollow
the whole of this body
wholly empty
wholly void
all holes
wholly insubstantial
hollow.....hollow
the way to holiness.

75

We take a bag to go shopping, and it gets filled up with what we want, if we pay the price.

In the same way this skin bag gets filled up, according to our desires. And we pay the price: old age and death.

The Discourses on the Arrow

The Buddha:

Here life's for mortals, wretched and brief,
unknown its end; incalculable and 'tis to dukkha joined.

That those who are born will never die no means are there indeed! Having reached decay there's death, thus is the law for beings.

As for fruit that is ripe there's always fear of falling
so for mortals who are born there's always fear of death.

Just as vessels made of clay by a maker of pots
all end by being broken, so death is (the end) of life.

The young and those who're great in age, the fools together with the wise, all go under the sway of death, for all death is the goal.

Those who are overcome by death and going to another world, the father cannot protect his son, nor relatives their kin.

While relatives are watching, weeping and lamenting,
see mortal beings one by one led as an ox to slaughter.

As the world is thus afflicted by death and by decay,

therefore the wise grieve not knowing the nature of the world.

Their path you do not know by which they come, by which they go. Neither end is seen by you, useless your lament!

If then by lamenting benefits were obtained then the wise would do so, a fool just hurts himself.

Not by crying nor by grief the mind attains to peace but will more dukkha is produced, the body as well is harmed.

One becomes both pale and thin – one merely hurts oneself, not thus are the dead protected, it's useless to lament!

By not forsaking grief one goes to greater dukkha, bewailing those who've died one's in the sway of grief.

See other men who go along, go according to kamma, so being tremble here with fear come under the sway of death.

However they conceive it, it's quite other than that, just so is separation – see the nature of the world!

Though one lived for a hundred years or even more, such a man is separated from his kin and here he leaves his life.

So having heard the arahats, give up your lamentation.

Seeing the corpse (one should think): “He’ll not be met by me again”.

As a burning house with water should be extinguished,*
So one wise and steadfast, a man who’s wise in wholesomeness quickly is rid of arisen grief as wind a tuft of down.

One who desires his own happiness let him pull out his own arrow – lamentations and longings, the grief that’s in himself.

Arrow withdrawn, unattached, the mind attains to peace, passed beyond all grief, griefless and extinguished.

(Salla Sutta, Sutta-nipāta, verses 574-593)

77

The Discourse on Old Age**

The Buddha:

Short indeed is this life –
within a hundred years one dies,
and if anyone lives longer
then he dies of decay.

*“Extinguished”: for the putting out of the flames of greed, aversion and delusion (= Arahatship) the same verb is used, as in the last line of these verses.

** Or on “Ageing” or “Decay”

People grieve for what is “mine”: indeed possessions are not permanent and this is subject to destruction – see this and homeless dwell!

In death it is abandoned yet man thinks “it is mine”. Knowing this, the wise man devoted to me should not stoop down to making “his own”.

As a man awake sees not the things he met in sleep, so too the one beloved is not seen having departed and done his time.

People now are seen and heard and thus are called by name, but alone shall the name remain for the departed to be spoken of.

The greedy in “mine” – making do not give up sorrow, lamentation, avarice, therefore sages leaving possessions have wandered about, Seers of the Secure.

For a bhikkhu practicing seclusion, keeping company with the secluded mind, all are agreed and say of him “He should not show himself again in becoming!”

The sage is unsupported in all circumstances,
nothing he makes dear nor what is not dear,
sorrow and avarice stain him not,
just as water stays not upon a leaf.

As a water-drop upon a lotus plant,
as water does not stain a lotus flower,
even so the sage is never stained
by what has been seen, heard and sensed by him.

Certainly the wise man does not conceive
by what has been seen, heard and sensed,
nor through another does he wish for purity
for he is not attached nor yet is he displeased.

(Jarā Sutta, Sutta-nipāta, verses 804-813)

78

Contemplation of Death

“Uncertain is life:
Certain is death
Inevitable is death for me.
My life has death at its end.

Life is indeed unsure,
But death is sure,
Death is sure.”

(From the Dhammapada commentary
story of the Weavers' daughter)

“As soon as evening comes, or when the night vanishes and day is breaking, a bhikkhu reflects in this way: ‘Truly there are many possibilities for me to die – I may be bitten by a snake, or stung by scorpion or centipede – and thereby lose my life. But this would be an obstacle for me. Or I may stumble and fall down, or food eaten may not agree with me. Or bile, phlegm and piercing bodily “winds” may upset me – and thereby I may lose my life. Then men or ghosts may attack me – and thereby I may lose my life. But this would be an obstacle for me’. Then the bhikkhu should consider thus: ‘Are there still found in me unsubdued evil unwholesome factors which, if I should die this day or night, might lead me to dukkha?’ Now, if he understands that this is the case, he should use his utmost resolution, energy, effort, endeavour, steadfastness, attentiveness, and clear-mindedness to overcome these evil unwholesome factors.”

(A. VIII. 74, trans. after Ven. Nyanatiloka in
Buddhist Dictionary, P. 98)

The Arahat Ratthapala Thera's Verses Addressed To The Aged King Koravya

I see men wealthy in the world, who yet
Give not, from ignorance, their gatheren riches;
But greedily will hoard away their wealthy,
Through longing for still further sensual pleasures.

A king who has by force conquered the earth
And even lords the land the ocean bounds
Is yet unsated with the sea's near shore
And hungers for its further shore as well.

Most men as well, not just a king,
Encounter death with craving unabated;
With plans still incomplete they leave the corpse;
Desires remain unstated in the world.

His relatives lament him, rend their hair,
Crying "Ah me! Alas! Our love is dead!",
Then bear away the body wrapped in shrouds
To place it on a pyre and burn it there.

Clad in a single shroud, he leaves behind
His property, and prodded with stakes he burns,
And as he died, no relative or kin
Or friend could offer refuge to him here.

The while his heirs annex his wealth, this being
Must now pass on according to his kammas;
And as he dies no thing can follow him:
Nor child nor wife nor wealth nor royal estate.

Longevity is not acquired with wealth
Nor can prosperity banish old age;
Short is this life, as all the sages say,
Eternity it knows not, only change.

The rich man and the poor man both shall feel
(Death's) touch, as do the fool and sage alike;
But while the fool lies stricken by his folly,
No sage will ever tremble at the touch.

Better is understanding, then, whereby
The goal can here be gained, than any wealth;
For men through different lives in ignorance
Do evil, while they fail to reach the goal.

As one goes to the womb and the next world,
Renewing the successive round, so another
With no more understanding, trusting him,
Goes also to the womb and the next world.

Just as a robber caught in burglary
By his own kamma's marked a miscreant,
So people after death, in the next world
By their own kammas marked are they as miscreants.

For sense-desires so mind-alluring, sweet,
In many a different way disturb the mind;
Seeing the danger in these sense-desires
So I went forth to homelessness, O king.

(From Middle Length Discourses No. 82,
trans. Ven. Nyanamoli Thera)

81

“Short indeed is this life of men, limited, fleeting, full
of woe and torment; it is just like a dewdrop that vanishes

as soon as the sun rises; like a water-bubble; like a line drawn on water; like a torrent dragging everything along and never standing still; like cattle for slaughter that every moment look death in the face."

(A. VII. 70, condensed trans. after
Ven. Nyanatiloka in Buddhist Dictionary, p.99)

82

If "I" am dying when this Bag of Bones packs up, then the pain is terrible indeed, but if it's just this bag of bones packing up.....then?

83

- A. What's going to die?
- B. I am going to die!
- A. Nonsense!
- B. What do you mean?
- A. The body is going to die. It's only you dying if you identify the body as yourself.
- B. That's a good thought. Then I am not going to die. I shall live for ever!
- A. Can do, if that's what you want! But think of the sufferings, born and dying, again and again.
- B. How do I get out of it?
- A. Just as you don't identify with the body, so you try not identifying with the mind.

B. Wow! How come! Impossible! I don't identify with my mind. There's only one me.

A. Suppose you see no *me*, suppose there is just ~~perceived~~
emptiness and no *me* perceiving it, what then? ~~perceives~~

B. Oh! But I do! I'm just now, and have just now, seen

84

Interesting that religions (all of them) concern themselves so much with the dead *bodies*. Ceremonies of various sorts are all conducted round the lifeless lumps of decaying flesh. Yet each religion is concerned really with whatever is thought of as continuing. It shows that attachment to *the body as the person* is very strong.

And in English we talk of "the dead" as opposed to "the living". But for a Buddhist there are no dead people, only decaying bodies. Paradoxically, a person, while not rid of the concept of personality, never dies.

85

Villagers in Buddhist countries are often better schooled in the body and its end than are educated Westerners. The former have plenty of chances to go to the local temple, or to see the nearest meditation teacher. And what do they hear? Again and again they hear the sound of ANICCA, DUKKHA, ANATTA* of all parts of the human being, mind and body.

* *Impermanence, Unsatisfactoriness, No-self.*

By hearing frequently it sinks in, so that even if people never penetrate these Three Marks of Existence in themselves, at least they have an attitude of accepting them to some extent. It helps with decay, disease, and death. And they see friends and kin cremated, not in a posh chapel with soft music, solemn colours and concealed oven, but on top of a pile of logs in the forest. That's the body burning – there's that smell of meat ... and this body too will go the same way. These things are good to see. They are healthy, wholesome. There is no false solemnity, things are just the way they are. Undisguised.

86

People in Buddhist lands who have so often heard teaching about ANICCA, impermanence, are more ready to accept the common end than a great many Westerners. Old age, disease and death are better accepted by Buddhists as just as natural a part of life as birth. One does not bewail the birth of a child – though painful enough for both mother and child – so why bewail the naturally succeeding events? Buddhists who know the Dhamma well talk naturally and calmly about their old age and death as they have contemplated as ANICCA everything in this (and any other) world.

87

There is nothing like living in a little hut in the tropical forest to make one realize how vulnerable this body is to all sorts of attack. How very small creatures can make life

difficult if not precarious for this body. A city-dweller misses most of this and may easily get a false sense of security. (All those neat little suburban houses in regular rows).

Another thing which life in the wilds makes really necessary is mindfulness. Mindfulness where one puts one's feet, specially in the dark. And then one cannot get on without loving-kindness too, since all sorts of other beings are so near to oneself, near to this body which one fears for. Loving-kindness rids one of such fears and hatreds.

88

We have so many fears – all things out there – ghosts, darkness, unknown people, loneliness, and so on. The really fearful things, this mind-and-body's precarious state, we never see.

89

The body has a side which most of us don't want to see and know. We wish to hush up its dirt, stinks, belches and farts, to disregard and overlook them. Yet finally when laid low and near to death, these stenches and filths can be disguised no longer.

90

It is a salutary lesson if one gets the chance, to go to an autopsy and watch the doctors and nurses pulling a body to pieces. One's eyes are not prepared for this sight even if

one has watched a butcher chopping up meat. And one's nose can well be assaulted too by the overpowering stench of decay if the corpse is just a few days old.

To see this is to experience for oneself some Dhamma: how the body is just conditioned and decaying bits and pieces. "As this body is, so that body was; as that body is, so this body will be."

91

Lists like the following ten stages of the body's decay are often illustrated in traditional Buddhist art, in ancient books and on temple walls, as often seen in Thailand. These are like special prescriptions for the disease of lust:

- a bloated corpse (cures attachment to shapeliness)
- a discoloured corpse (cures attachment to colour and complexion)
- a festering corpse (cures attachment to bodily smell and fine perfumes)
- a gnawn-by-animals corpse (cures attachment to greed for fleshly protuberances)
- a scattered corpse (cures attachment to gracefulness of limbs)
- a bleeding corpse (cures attachment to decoration of the body with ornaments)
- a worm-infested corpse (cures attachment to body as one's own)

a skeleton held together by sinews (cures attachment to fine bone structure)
scattered bones (cures attachment to body as 'one thing')
rotting and powdered bones (cures attachment to the body as permanent)

92

This Body ...

This body lying in decay
To worms and flies unconscious prey,
Bereft of mind and animation
Portrays man's final situation.

Engendered in a human womb,
A fabric wrought upon the loom
Of sensual lust and will-to-be,
It grew in stature like a tree,
But mind-informed, with fresh desires
Raging within like hungry fires,
Fed by the senses' ample fuel
In an eternal self-renewal.

Self-renewed and self-consumed,
A turbulence forever doomed
To futile striving, hopes and fears,
Alternating through the years:
Childhood, youth, maturity,
Seeking in vain security,

Seeking in vain to quench the fire
By satisfaction of desire.

And day by day with every breath,
Every heart-beat a little death,
Stole from the body's failing source
A fraction of its vital force.
The body undermined by stealth,
Then knew the pangs of failing health.

(Francis Story: From *The Buddhist Outlook*)

93

**Verses of the Arahat Kulla Thera
on seeing a corpse**

Having gone to the charnel-ground
I saw cast there a woman's corpse,
discarded in the cemetery,
being gnawn and full of worms.
A rotten congeries, Kulla, see –
diseased it is, impure,
oozing and trickling here and there
wherein fools find delight.
This body I inspected –
inane within and without –
taking the Dhamma's looking-glass
to Knowing and Seeing attained.
As this body is, so that body was;
as that body is, so will this body be.
As foul it is above so foul it is below,
and as it is above so it is below.

As it is by day, so it is by night;
As night, so day the same.
There's no such pleasure even from a quintet's music as there is from rightly Dhamma seeing with singleness of mind.

(Verses of the Elder Bhikkhus, 393-398)

The “Knowing and Seeing” – insight (vipassana) – that this thera saw in himself is first:

Seeing no difference between the living and the dead bodies – only time makes a difference.

Then seeing the dead body as totally foul – not attracted to this (=greed) or repelled by that (=hatred), and applying this to his own body.

Then seeing that all the time, day or night, the body has the same qualities – not that it is desirable at some times but not at others.

The enjoyments that most get from senses-pleasures – here the example of a quintet is given – this thera has found far more abundantly in seeing Dhamma rightly.

94

Spiritual objector:

“All this pondering over corpses and looking into the body's parts is just morbid. One should look at the body as a pure temple of the spirit.”

Practical Upasaka:

“It goes against the grain to gaze at the bits and pieces in this body and see that they have nothing attractive about them. But this way lies Liberation. To glorify the body is to be bound by craving for it.”

95

Doctor: I cannot understand you when you say that the body is unbeautiful; to me it is such a wonderful mechanism!

Bhikkhu: The trouble with that view of the “wonderfulness of the body” is that it is near to delight (nandi) and delighting in the body is another name for craving, the root of dukkha. Seeing the body’s unattractiveness is opposed to craving.

96

A Manichee and a Buddhist

M. It’s all the work of Satan – this foul body. We agree with you Buddhists about that.

B. Well, the body is certainly not pleasant when examined, but we do not say that it has been created by Satan.

M. But all matter is evil, foul, dragging the soul into darkness, as our Mani says.

B. That’s not what the Buddha says though. Matter is just earth, water, fire and air elements which are quite

neutral, neither good nor evil. They form bodies due to the kamma made by beings – good or evil kammas both lead to the formation of bodies.

M. You must admit though that your body is a hindrance to the attainment of spiritual states. You have to feed it and rest it, dose it with medicine when it gets sick. Because of its wretchedness the soul is weighted down.

B. No, I do not admit that. The body is the basis and vehicle for practice so one should take care of it without pampering it. Though it has to eat, sleep, excrete and it gets sick too, at these times we should be mindful, which is possible at all times when not asleep. Even the difficulties of the body can be used in Dhamma-practice. And what is this about a soul being weighed down?

M. Well, that is the pure aspirations, the pure thoughts, the still states of contemplation – that is the beginning of discovering the soul.

B. Oh then the impure aspirations, thoughts and confused states of mind must be not soul! You should investigate all mental states, pure and impure, calm and distracted, and find out whether any of them are substantial or permanent. What would you find, do you think?

M. All right, they're changing. But behind them all is the pure tranquil soul, eternally unchanging.

B. But have you experienced this or are you just telling me some dogma or belief?

M. Yes, I think I have experienced it. Then one is free from the trammels of this body.

B. Really you need to examine all mental states, as I mentioned before, and the body too, in the same light. They're all Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta...

M. What...?

B. Sorry! I get so used to using those words that they have slipped off my tongue, unmindfully I am afraid! They mean impermanent, unsatisfactory and no self. When you look at them like this you neither love the soul nor hate the body. That is, put in a Buddhist way, you don't cling to pure tranquility and identify it as your soul or self, neither do you reject this body. Don't lay the blame on this poor old body! It's not to blame.

M. But Mani says that it is.

B. Well then, I shall ask you a question. What makes decisions and choices, is it the body or the mind?

M. The mind decides, of course.

B. Then how can the body be blamed? It is not evil, nor is matter darkness. Poor old body just gets dragged along by the decisions the mind makes.

M. But you Buddhists practice contemplation of the body as foul. I have read about it.

B. Yes, but that does not mean it is evil. That kind of meditation is just to break up attachment to the beauty of bodies. It is the attachment in one's own mind, not any Satan or evil creator, that is responsible for keeping the mind tied down to sensual pleasures.

Look inside for the evil creator – his name is attachment, greed, desire, lust – and he is put out of business by contemplating the unattractive. The good creator is in there too, the mind that creates pure mental states, the experience of Jhanna and so on. But all this creating keeps one in the round of rebirth, you know.. !

A. Hey, man! Why you cut your hair and beard? Hair's natural to have but you monks cut it off. We should keep it, its natural, its beautiful.

Bhikkhu: It's cut off for two reasons. First it decorates this body. You people like decoration. That's what lay life is all about. But bhikkhus like the body plain, without distractions, so that they can see what it's really like.

A. Well, what's it really like?

B. If you like it as it is, "naturally", you should try not washing, not brushing the teeth or cleaning the nails, not combing the hair – and so on. Body and its part are only beautiful if washing is also "natural".

A. So, you said that hair decorates, what's your other reason?

B. It's a disguise, that beard and moustache – it's something to hide behind, a mask. When you have no hair on the head and face you have no mask behind which to retire. Is it natural or beautiful to hide things? Isn't it better to open up? Who solves problems by hiding them away? Shaving hair and beard is also an outer token of the shaving off of conceit and pride which has to be done steadily and carefully over years of practice.

The Silent Shrine

Where silence reigns the Buddha sits,
 He dwells along, the only face
 Has He that one should ever look upon
 Deep within the shrine that always is,
 The centre of this house –
 Where is it found?
 Flesh the walls and bones the beams
 With windows five to look upon the world,
 While wandering, a witless idiot
 Roams through the empty rooms;
 How slow is he to come upon that shrine,
 How faltering his steps unsure!
 Distractedly, confused
 He fumbles for the door –
 Hinges rusty, locked for long, unused,
 Swollen wood and jammed the door decayed.
 When will he look, this witless one,
 When will he see the ancient face of peace?
 When will he worship at the shrine?
 When will he know the Way and Fruit?
 When will he find the silence
 Where the Buddha sits?

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